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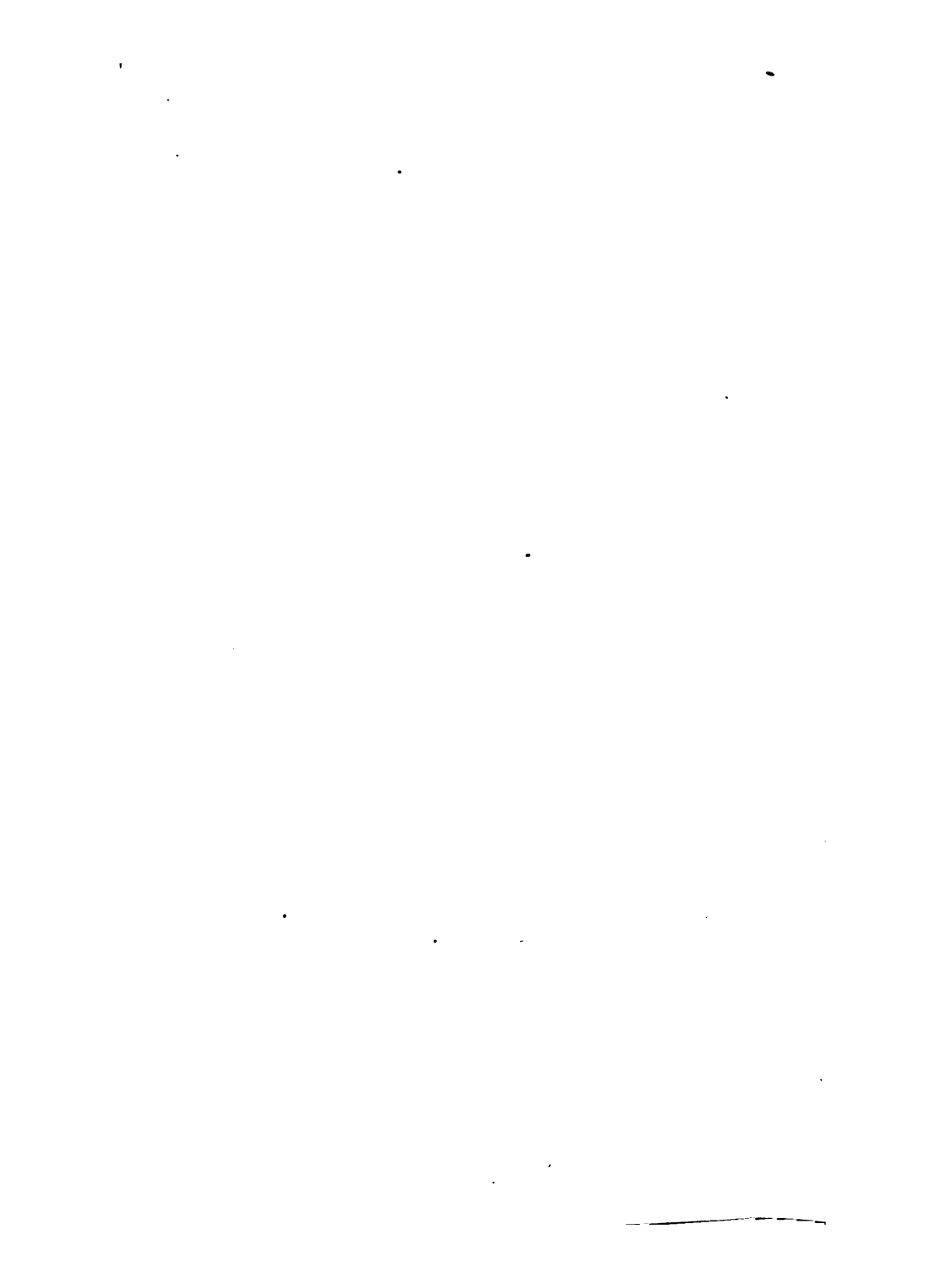




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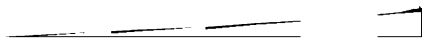
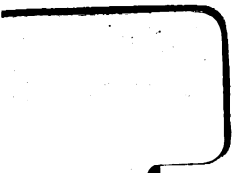


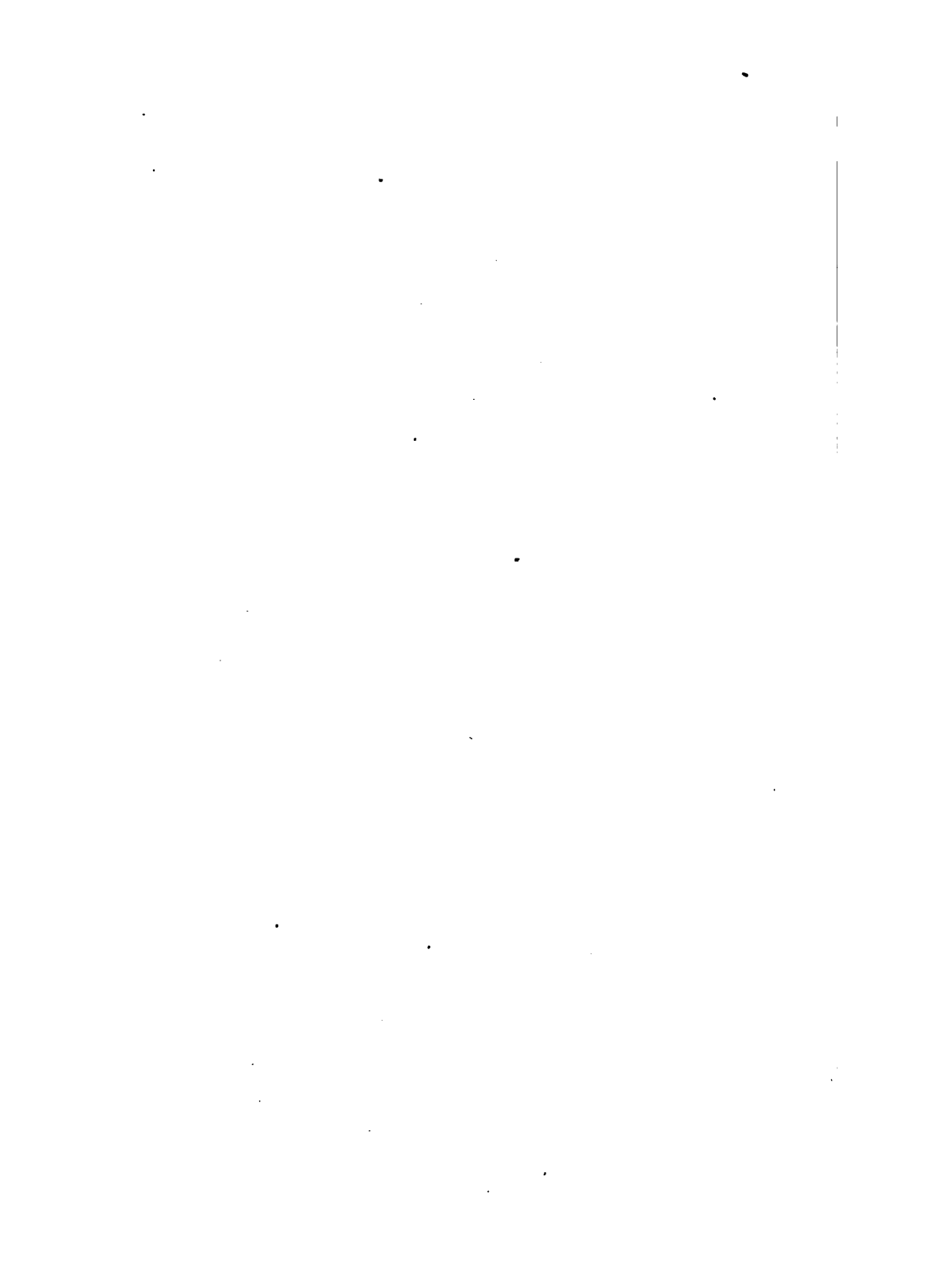


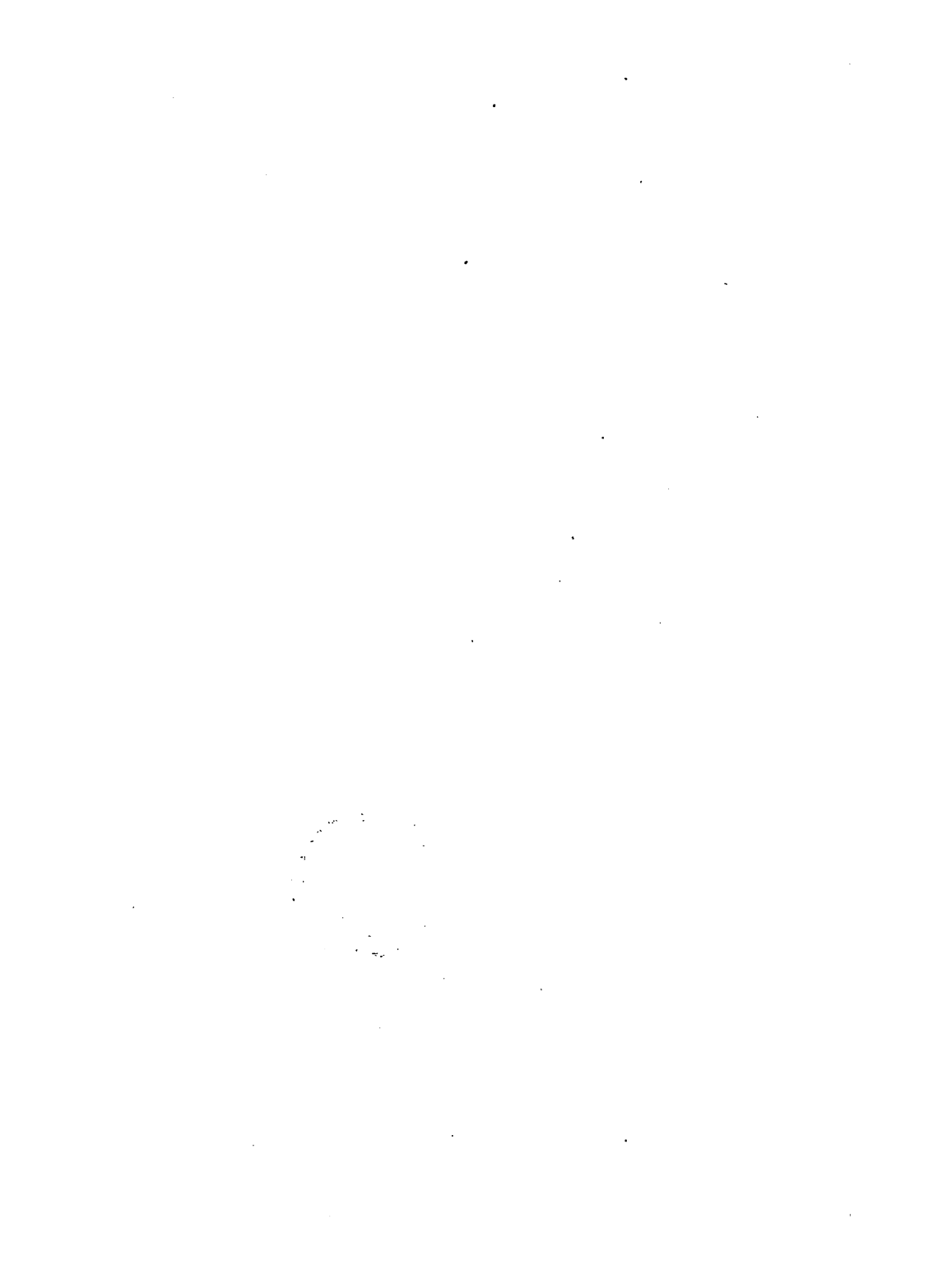




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ABOVE SUSPICION.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF

"GEORGE GEITH," "TOO MUCH ALONE," "HOME, SWEET HOME,"
"THE EARL'S PROMISE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



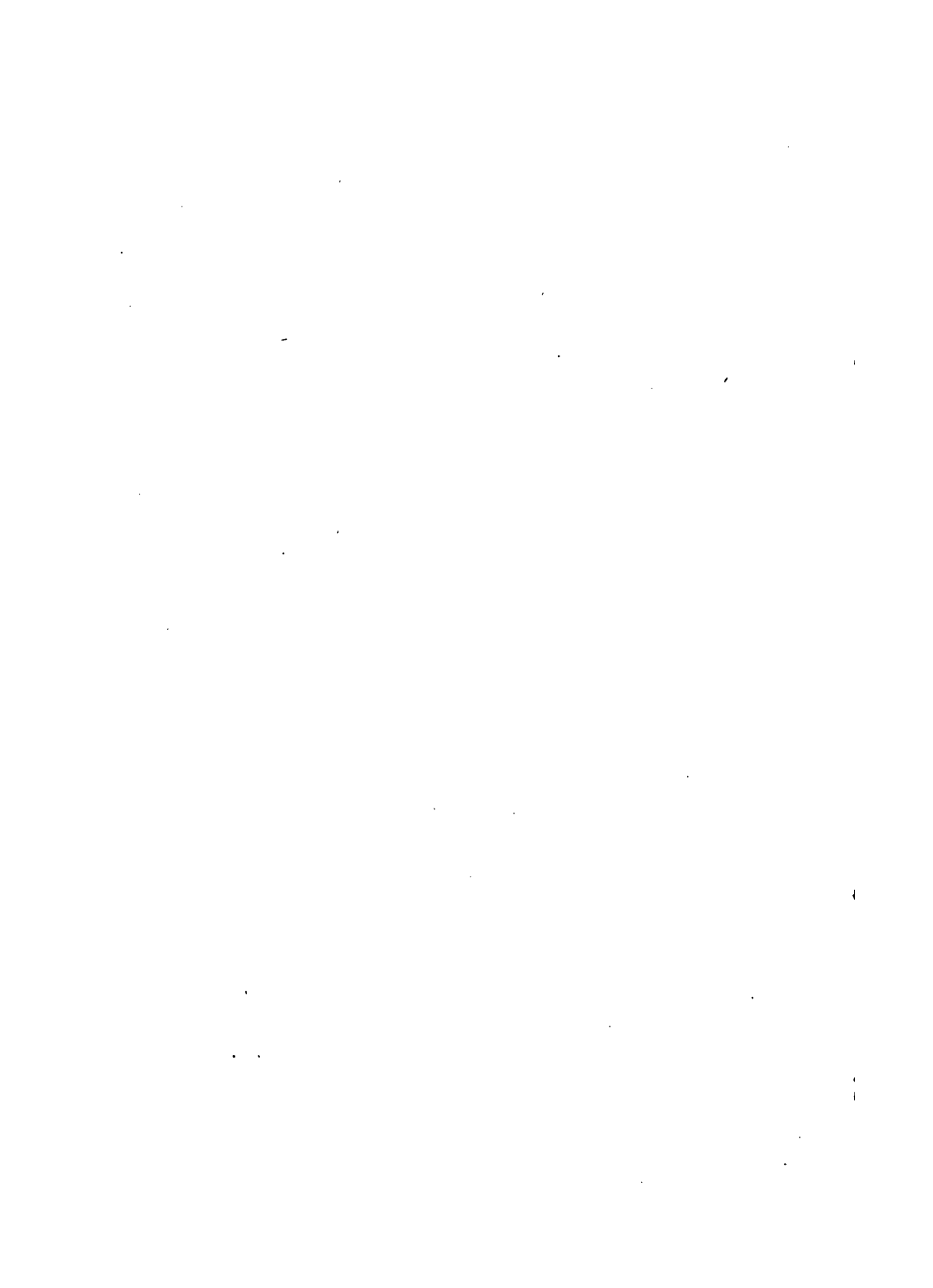
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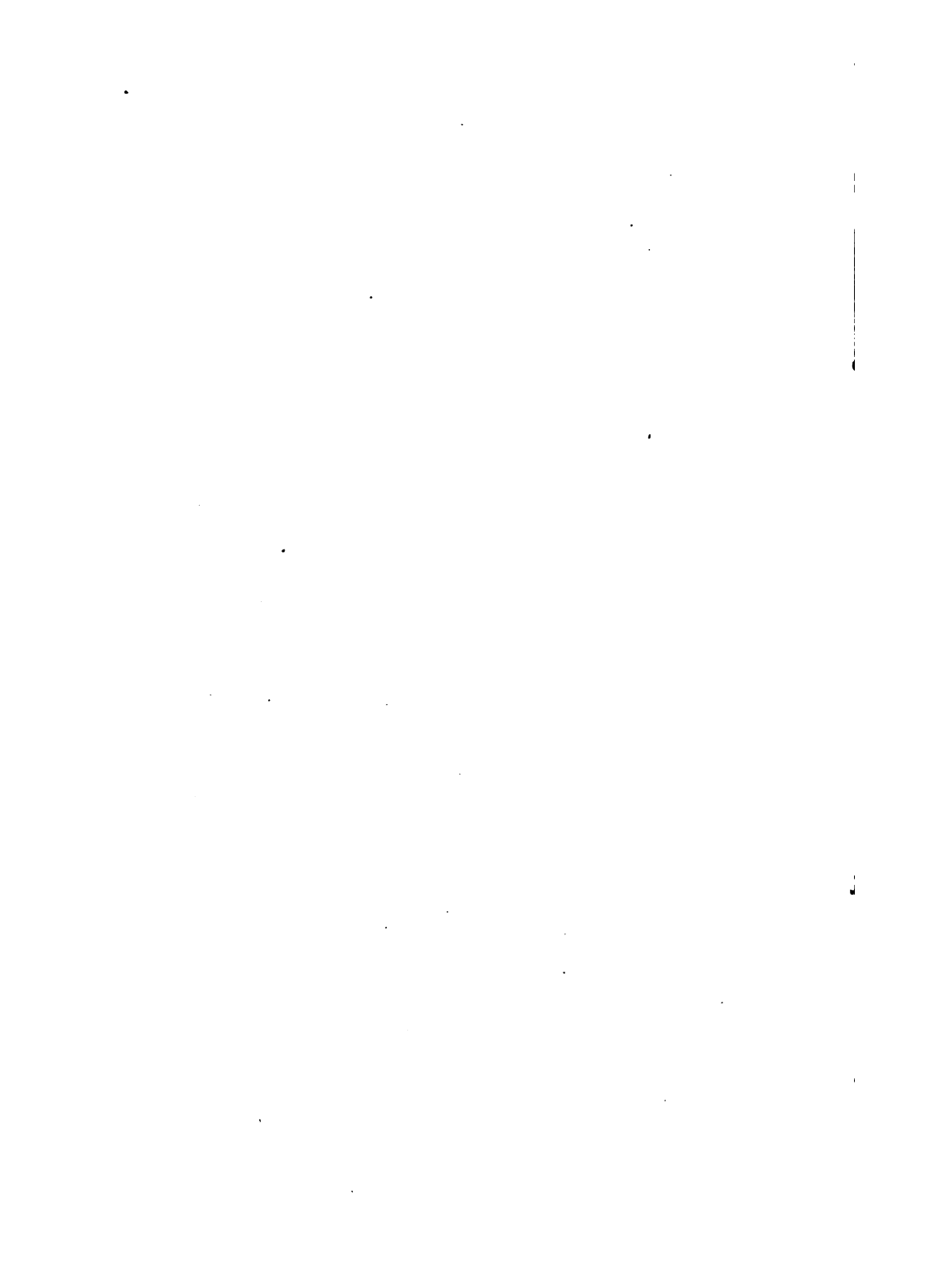
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ABOVE SUSPICION.

CHAPTER I.

MR. WRIGHT WONDERS WHAT SELINA
WILL SAY.

It seemed as if, after all, Miss Bella Miles, kept so studiously from disturbing the domestic peace—if peace such an armed neutrality could be called—of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin, was to prove, even before she appeared at Fisherton, an apple of discord between the Rector and his wife.

There were many things Mrs. Wright wanted to do on the strength of her

coming, which even Mr. Wright's slight knowledge of Mr. Irwin's character and position taught him could not be done; and when he ventured to suggest difficulties, Selina waxed fractious.

"Of course we must refurnish a bedroom for her," said Mrs. Wright. "She can sleep in it when no one is staying here; and it will do for best bed-chamber when Colonel Leschelles, or any one else very particular, comes for a few days. And we had better have good articles when we are buying—they always prove the cheapest in the long run."

"You cannot get them without ready money," ventured Mr. Wright; "and where that is to come from perhaps you know. I confess I do not."

"It shall come from Mr. Irwin," she replied, standing well to her guns.

"I don't think it will," said the Rector;

“at any rate, I should not select the things till you have his cheque in your purse to pay for them. But of course you know best.”

Which remark putting the lady on her mettle, she at once went to her desk, and in an extremely clear, pretty, and feminine hand, wrote a clever little note to Mr. Irwin, assuring him of the pleasure she should feel in welcoming his niece to the rectory, and adding a hope that in time the young girl “may become as much attached to me as I am sure I shall be to her.” After this statement, which had no insincerity about it, since Mrs. Wright’s power of attaching herself to unlikely objects was indeed as boundless, and oftentimes as foolish, as her charity, the Rector’s wife went on to say: “So as to be certain to have everything ready for her reception by the time you mentioned

to Mr. Wright, I am just ordering furniture for her room—ours being too heavy and old-fashioned, not to say shabby—to please a young lady whose tastes have been formed abroad. I hope to have all bright and pretty to greet her on her arrival here. Again assuring you that nothing love and care can do to promote her happiness shall be wanting on my part,

“Believe me,

“Yours very sincerely,

“SELINA WRIGHT.”

“Good heavens! they will refurnish the rectory on the strength of that hundred a year,” was Mr. Irwin’s first thought; while once again the reality of the unwelcome visitor whose presence had driven Mr. Wright to Riversdale seemed an utter impossibility. “Could

the Rector and his wife be sane?" he wondered. "Was it credible that, within ten days of having his goods rescued from the sheriff, Mr. and Mrs. Wright were actually talking of purchasing more goods, which in their turn would, no doubt, if this was the way the family at Fisherton meant to live on bread and water, be watched and guarded, when the next instalment of the old debt became overdue, by another emissary from Mr. Gath Reuben, sheriff's officer?"

"Instead of benefiting, I shall be ruining them," considered Mr. Irwin. "What ought I to do in the matter?" and he was perplexing himself on this point, when it suddenly crossed his mind that the Wrights were sane enough; that Mrs. Wright had apprised him of her hospitable intentions, with a view of getting the

money to pay for them out of his purse ; and that the sooner he made her understand he had no intention of letting her do anything of the sort, the better it would prove for all parties interested.

Having so decided, he took pen in hand, and, in writing which exactly resembled copperplate, replied to Mrs. Wright's note as follows :—

“ 512 Eastcheap, London,

“ 29th July, 18—.

“ MY DEAR MADAM,

“ I hasten to express my thanks for your very kind note, just received. Bella will, I trust, do her utmost to merit your good opinion, and to deserve the affection you are so generous as to offer. But pray do not make any alteration in the arrangements of your house on her account. Believe me, she will be more than satisfied with the present appoint-

ments of any room it may be most convenient for you to assign her. A girl who has been for years the inmate of a French school can have had no opportunity of acquiring a taste for luxuries ; and, situated as she is, it would be most undesirable for her ever to do so. With assurances of my respect, and gratitude for all your kind intentions with regard to my niece's comfort and happiness,

“ I have the honour to remain

“ Yours faithfully,

“ W. C. IRWIN.”

At the period of the world's history of which I write the morning's post at Fisherton came heralded by the sound of a bugle. On the especial morning when Mr. Irwin's missive arrived at the rectory—breakfast happening to be rather later than usual—Mrs. Wright was dis-

pensing weak tea to the family generally, when the letters were brought in.

Copperplate penmanship being apt, as all the world knows, to occupy a considerable amount of space, Mr. Irwin's epistle felt bulky enough to have contained half a dozen cheques, for which reason Mrs. Wright laid it down beside her cup, with a satisfied little pat, and looked across at her husband with a look which said, "The grey mare has again proved the better horse."

Before he had finished his breakfast, Mr. Wright was called away to speak to one of his churchwardens; and by the time that individual had said his say and departed, the children were fed and out in the garden.

Cheerfully the Rector stepped back into the parlour, exclaiming, as he entered—

"Well, my dear, how much has our good friend sent you?"

MR. WRIGHT WONDERS.

“Read for yourself,” said Mrs. Wright, handing him the note, with an air of resignation. “You need not talk to me about the man being a gentleman—and writing such a hand, too, like a clerk’s!”

“I can tell you I thought I had never seen a nicer hand than his when he signed that cheque,” observed her husband.

“Oh! that is all past and done with,” retorted Mrs. Wright, whose gratitude for past favours was even more evanescent than that of the Reverend Dion. “It is quite clear to me we have a Jew to deal with—yes, a Jew, Christian—and we shall not be at all the better for Miss or her hundred a year—having to keep an extra servant, too.”

Now, this was one of the points over which she and her husband had argued not a little, and, consequently, the reverend gentleman at once replied that

he could see no reason, or rhyme either, in keeping another servant.

“We have a pair already,” he remarked, not without reason on his side, “and between them they get through less work than when we had only one. Given that we take on a third, we shall have to keep them, and do all the work ourselves.”

“I wish you had to do my work for a day—only one,” said Mrs. Wright—“and you would not talk so glibly about three servants being unnecessary.”

Having delivered herself of which sentiment, Mrs. Wright took her parasol, strolled out into the garden, found a comfortable seat, and was soon absorbed in a new novel. Never, in their poorest days, had the Rector’s wife failed to pay her subscription to a well stocked library.

“It was essential to their position to keep *au courant* with what was going on

in the literary world," she said. And to do Mrs. Wright justice, she read a greater number and variety of books than any reviewer.

Curiously enough, all the things Mrs. Wright considered it incumbent upon her to perform, in order to maintain that position necessary to their well-being and success in life, were those for which she had a natural taste. Ill-conditioned people said she never believed in a duty unless it chanced to be a pleasure likewise, to which the lady herself, on one occasion, retorted, that it was only right to feel duty a pleasure.

"I am sure I try to do so," finished the Rector's wife; and on this principle she found that duty demanded a third servant in addition to the two, whose wages, though paid in a scrambling, irregular sort of fashion, they were scarcely able to manage.

“ She must assist with the needlework, and get up your shirts, dear,” explained Mrs. Wright, when demonstrating that a third servant would prove a saving instead of an expense. “ We must not employ a laundress then at all, even for your shirts.”

The meekest of men domestically, Mr. Wright nevertheless rebelled at this. “ Help with the needlework she may,” he said, “ but get up my linen she never shall. I do not object to a shabby coat occasionally; but wear shirts looking as if they were mangled, and cravats like wisps, I will not; remember that, Selina.”

Whereupon Selina observed that he always thwarted her in any scheme she proposed for reducing the domestic expenditure.

“ I am not sure,” thought Mr. Wright, as he walked through his parish, head well

up, chest protruded, umbrella shouldered —“I am not sure” (he pronounced the latter word shu-ah) “whether Providence did not intend the shortness of money, at which I have so often repined, as a blessing. There is an under-current of mercy in many of those misfortunes poor humanity finds it so hard to endure; and it may be that I have purchased domestic happiness at the cheap price of chronic insolvency. It may be, God forgive me the ungracious thought, that Selina, if easy in her mind about pecuniary matters, might develop some faults of another kind fatal to that peace which has hitherto brooded over our home.”

Before the next Sunday Mr. Wright had eliminated a sermon from this idea. Having, for a wonder, received no dunning or threatening letters during the whole week, he was able to give more

thought than usual to the subject he proposed treating; and he wrote what he wanted to say carefully, and blotted out freely, the result being a very good discourse, to which Mrs. Wright listened with pleased though critical ears.

“I am certain, Dion,” she said as they walked home together in the summer twilight—it was at evening service the Rector preached the sermon in question —“that no one in the church could have failed to take some good for him or herself out of your words to-night. It was all so true and yet so plain. I have not your facility of expression, Dion, nor, of course, your grasp of mind, but I declare that often, in a vague sort of way, I have thought the evils we consider most unendurable are really blessings in disguise. For instance (I know you will not misunderstand what I say), it has

sometimes occurred to me, if we had not been obliged to struggle for a large family and contend with poverty, you might not have been one half so amiable as you are; you might have been unreasonable, inclined to be captious and irritable about trifles. Now, Dion, what are you laughing at? I am not jesting. I really do not think you could bear the sun of prosperity as well as you have done the winds of adversity."

"I should like to be tried, my dear," answered the Rector, forgetting to practise the virtue himself had inculcated, and then he laughed again; but he did not dare tell his wife that the same idea about her, had given birth to his sermon.

"It is really very funny," he said to himself, as he put his manuscript away with a goodly company of other docu-

ments of the same nature. "I shall never be able to preach that sermon again with gravity—never!"

For Mr. Wright had brought a certain sense of humour into the world with him; and not all the years spent in borrowing and begging money, to keep wolves away from the domestic hearth, had been able to destroy his appreciation of any circumstance which struck him as ludicrous.

The furniture was not bought, but the new maid was hired; and then arose another little misunderstanding between the Rector and his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Irwin were going to Paris, and it was Mr. Irwin's wish that his new friend should repair to the same place, at the same time, in order that Miss Miles might be committed to his charge by her uncle, and brought back to Fisherton by the Rector of that

“ favourite summer resort ”—see local guide-book.

Mr. Irwin, of course, was to hand Mr. Wright a sufficient sum to cover his travelling and hotel expenses. And Mr. Wright, happy at the prospect of such a holiday as a schoolboy, delightedly closed with the proposal, and returned home, never doubting but that Selina would be delighted also to hear of the pleasure in store for her husband. To his astonishment, Mrs. Wright at once objected to the whole scheme.

“ I do not think it would be at all proper, Dion, for you to be wandering about the Continent alone with a young lady,” she began.

“ But, my dear,” he interrupted, “ I have no idea of wandering about the Continent with any young lady. I shall bring her straight home.”

“If it be necessary for any one to go, I am the proper person,” persisted Mrs. Wright.

“Come, Selina, that is good!” cried the Rector. “If it is not the correct thing for me to travel from Paris to London with a chit no older than one of my own girls, I am quite positive it would be most improper for you to be running over Paris with Mr. Irwin.”

“Don’t be immoral, Dion,” entreated his wife.

“My dear, if any immorality has been suggested, most certainly I am not the one to blame. So far as I am concerned, you are welcome to go on this trip instead of me; but I do not think Mrs. Grundy would be satisfied with such a proceeding, and I am quite certain Mr. Irwin would not.”

“I must beg of you not to mention

Mr. Irwin to me," said Mrs. Wright. "He is not a gentleman, I am convinced. No gentleman would have so completely ignored me throughout this whole arrangement as he has done. But I am determined to assert my position. I shall go to Paris to fetch that girl."

"If such is your resolve," remarked Mr. Wright, "we shall have to travel together, for, most decidedly, I mean to fetch that girl."

Which was a very strong position for the Rector, who usually deferred to his wife, to take up.

"Very well; let us arrange to do so," she said, after a minute's pause. "I dare say we can manage to get the money somehow."

Cash was short enough at the Rectory just then. But the state of the funds did not stop Mrs. Wright's contemplated

journey. She packed her trunk, she made some shiftless arrangements for the well-being of her children, and then she caught a severe cold—so severe that the doctor forbade her leaving her room, and Mr. Wright consequently set out for Paris alone, enjoyed himself there for four days thoroughly, and on the fifth was introduced by Mr. Irwin to his niece.

“I tell Bella she has grown quite a woman since I saw her,” said Mr. Irwin, with a grave smile. “I must not call her my little niece any longer, must I, Mr. Wright?” But Mr. Wright did not answer. For the moment he was struck literally dumb. He had expected to see an unformed, shy, retiring school miss; and suddenly there was presented to his astonished gaze a most beautiful girl—woman, the most beautiful girl, the Rector decided, he had ever seen; a young girl

possessed of a charming voice, and still more charming manners—who seemed to pervade the room with her beauty, and who filled Mr. Wright's heart with a terrible apprehension.

“What will Selina say?” he thought.
“What are we to do in our house with a creature like this?”

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST EVENING.

HAD Mr. Wright known as much about women as he did about many things—say writs, for example—he would not have spoiled the pleasure of his homeward journey by speculating on what Selina might say.

Men are very catholic in their ideas of beauty. If a face is pretty and a figure good, it matters little to the masculine mind whether the owner be tall or short, plump or slight, fair or dark, pensive or piquant. A woman, on the contrary, has, as a rule, only one standard, and that is herself. The world—the usages

of society—the little commonplace experiences of everyday life—the natural and charming deceitfulness of her sex, teach her to try to disguise this peculiarity even from other women; and therefore it is that we so often hear the phrases “sweet,” “charming,” “pretty, fragile creature,” “such a grand face,” and other expressions of a similar character, which might well deceive any one unaccustomed to look behind the curtain.

Sitting behind that curtain, however, in the *abandon* of dressing-gown and whatever may be the present substitute for curl-papers—or *tête-à-tête* at five-o'clock tea—or dreamily chatting by the sea-side while the waves ripple in and out upon the sand—or drawn into the still closer confidence engendered by a wet afternoon in a country house,—woman, talked to by woman, knows “all about it.”

She learns how Mrs. Juno "is distrustful of small snake-like women;" how interesting Miss Hysteria wonders what people can like in Diana; how Light-hair thinks there is always something staring about black eyes; while Black-eyes says, "for her part," she believes "there never yet was a straightforward woman to be found under the outward guise of a pretty doll."

We hear a great deal about the attraction of physical antagonism; but the reader may be certain this attraction never exists in the same sex. A woman's ideal of a hero may be as opposite to herself as night is to day; but her true ideal of a heroine will be the creature she has seen reflected back from her mirror every day since, perched on tip-toe, she first beheld her own face in the looking-glass.

Precisely the same remark would hold

good with regard to men, were it not that men are not interested in men in the same way as women are in women.

To most men, every man he meets is a possible source of profit; to all women, every woman assumes the form of a past, present, or future rival. If she cannot talk better, she can dress better; if she cannot do either, she can "look sweet," and so deceive humanity. If she takes a different line altogether, and expresses depreciatory opinions of mankind—not including its feminine portion—then male vanity is tickled, and male curiosity aroused, and, like David, her victims are tens, whilst those of her non-admiring lady friends are units.

All of which facts poor Mr. Wright, through that masculine love of generalization which is the snare of his sex, overlooked altogether.

Simply he saw that Bella Miles was beautiful exceedingly; and he therefore worried himself all the way from Paris to London over the consideration that Selina would not like it. Why he thought this, he must have failed to inform an inquirer. All he could have said, if examined on oath, amounted to no more than—"Though my dear Selina has more than the virtues of her sex, she has also a few of its failings, and sometimes she does not care for pretty women."

Which was quite true; but then he left out of calculation the fact that Mrs. Wright might not consider Miss Miles pretty: if that idea had only occurred to him, how happy he might have felt, *vis-à-vis* to a girl with great dark eyes, clear olive complexion, wonderful black hair, a rare beautiful smile, and an almost foreign accent.

“We shall be good friends, I hope,” he said, in his pompous, priestly, genially patronizing manner.

“Dear sir, no doubt,” she answered; “it must be so easy to feel good friends towards you.”

“You must not flatter me, my child,” he replied, pleased, nevertheless, with her words; and then he laid his hand softly on the girl’s head, and stroked her dark hair thoughtfully, the while he saw her expression alter, and the sunlight that had glanced across her face change to shadow.

How many times in the after days he beheld the same change turn the dark eyes, from sunlit waters to pools of darkness, it sickens him now to remember.

For liking him, she proved so good and so true; not one of his own children, charming as the Rector thought they

were, served him with so sweet an alacrity as she.

From the hour they met first in Paris, till the end, he found no change—no shadow of turning in his new *protégée*—whilst she——?

If you asked Mr. Wright how she found him, he would answer impatiently—

“I was a man beset. What is the use of looking back? If I did wrong, I am sorry for it.”

And he is, without any “if” about the matter. Between Mr. Wright’s self, and God, there lies knowledge of a story the Rector would give all he now possesses to be able to remember as untrue. To him, in the watches of the night, there come dark eyes, and low-toned voice laden with reproaches—eyes, the language of which he ought to have been able to understand; voice, musical with the bur-

den of an unspoken sorrow. A life laid in his hand, as it were, to answer for—laid there by chance, as it seemed, but really, as he afterwards understood, by no chance at all; which he used for his own purposes; which he marred because he, a servant of the Almighty, had found himself the slave to debt, and could furnish nor eyes, nor ears, nor understanding, save how best to keep creditors at bay, and continue the shiftless, harassed life he had led every day since the first hour of his marriage.

It is of no use his mentioning these visitations to Selina, his wife.

An admirable woman still, no doubt: good to the poor, fond of her children, attached to her husband, lenient to the peccadilloes of her servants,—nevertheless quite persuaded that Mr. Irwin was very little better than a swindler; and

Bella Miles a bad, unprincipled, deceitful girl, who ought never to have been permitted to sit, clothed in wickedness and duplicity, by any Christian hearth.

At the particular Christian hearth mentally referred to by Mrs. Wright, Mr. Wright and Miss Miles arrived in time for that composite meal, a "meat dinner."

Thinking, probably, that Miss Miles might consider there was safety in a multitude, Mrs. Wright had elected for the whole of her family to greet the new arrival; and accordingly, from Miss Maria down to the "puling infant," represented by Rosa, the latest arrow in the rectorial quiver, all the children sat round the table, staring at the new-comer with that delicate consideration which obtains amongst young animals of the human species.

Under such circumstances Miss Miles

naturally became nervous. She spoke French when she should have spoken English; and then when she apologized, the middle-sized children giggled, and the elder smiled with that air of superiority natural in the offspring of clergymen of any denomination in England; whilst the small fry set her with their round eyes, and mouths like the letter O, and wondered to themselves why she did not eat cake when it was pressed upon her—or, as an Irishwoman, then priestess of the culinary department at Fisherton rectory, remarked subsequently, “Make a baste of herself like the rest o’ them.”

“Curran, dear,” said Mrs. Wright, addressing one of her numerous offspring, “run away to the kitchen and tell nurse Mary to send us some more butter; don’t drop it by the way; that is a good boy.”

The good boy so addressed involuntarily

let one leg slip from the front to the side of his seat, but made no further sign of hearing, every sense being apparently absorbed in staring at the stranger.

“Curran, did you hear me?” asked his mother languidly.

“What do you mean, sir, by not doing what your mamma tells you?” inquired Mr. Wright, who always supported the maternal authority. “Sit still, my dear,” added the Rector to his guest, who had involuntarily risen to do Mrs. Wright’s bidding—the only creature at the table who seemed willing to perform an errand; “we do not expect you to fetch butter from the pantry—which, indeed, our servants ought to do, as they are paid for it,” added poor Mr. Wright, with a reflective sigh.

“Ah! Dion,” said Mrs. Wright plaintively, “Miss Miles can understand, I am

sure, what servants have to do in a house like ours. Run, Curran, and perhaps I may find something nice for you about twelve to-morrow."

Thus entreated, Curran, who had no fear before his eyes of anything which might have made him move much more rapidly, slid down from his chair and repaired to the kitchen, having first fortified himself for going into the wilderness by seizing a great hunch of bread.

Armed with this, he made his way to the servants' quarter, where he gave a full account of his impressions of Miss Miles to an appreciative audience.

"Jus' like sloes," said one who had first seen the young lady, referring to her eyes.

"A skin like a wild Indian," added another, who had heard Mrs. Wright express an opinion adverse to Miss Miles' complexion; and so the kitchen criticism

proceeded, while the parlour waited for its butter.

“Maria, ring the bell,” said Mr. Wright at length; whereupon Miss Maria rose and rang a sharp summons, which fetched the new servant from the conversational abysses in which she had been plunged.

“Did not Master Curran tell you we wanted some more butter?” asked Mrs. Wright.

“No, ma’am: and there isn’t any more in the house,” was the concise answer; at which Miss Miles blushed crimson, just as though she had consumed the reserve fund herself.

“Hey! ho hum!” sang Mr. Wright to himself, gently tapping his chest.

Spite of the debt and the humiliation, and the work and the worry, and the mental wear and tear, these little *con-*

*tretemp*s were not of infrequent occurrence, and the Rector might have become accustomed to them. But the Rector could not become accustomed to them, so cut short Mrs. Wright's indignant remonstrance with the servant upon the iniquity of allowing "things to run out without informing her, Mrs. W., of the fact," by saying—

"You can go, Mary." Then turning to Miss Miles, he added, "Such accidents will happen."

Which was quite true, as Miss Miles found before she had been two days in the house.

Tea finished, and all the children fed, Mrs. Wright proposed an adjournment to the drawing-room, where, after having looked out over the garden, on which a drizzling rain was falling, and advanced various topics for conversation and

exhausted them all, and talked at great length of Paris—which Mr. Wright called, in honour of his recent visit, Pa-ree—the Rector, who sometimes declared “he knew nothing of music, and wished every one else in the world was in like case,” merely as a new device for passing time, and as a polite attention to their new inmate, asked Miss Miles to play.

Miss Miles immediately rose to comply with this request—rose blushing, as was her wont.

“Shall Maria fetch your music down for you, dear?” suggested Mrs. Wright; “or will you look over the girls’ pieces and see if there are any you know?”

“Thank you,” answered Miss Miles, “but I can manage without the notes, I think.”

“The true way—the true way,” commented Mr. Wright, watching her as she

took up her position before the Broadwood square, which was always open on every working day, and very frequently not closed at night.

“You will find it a little out of tune, I am afraid,” remarked Mrs. Wright.

“It is, rather,” agreed Miss Miles, as she ran her fingers over the keys: and, indeed even had the instrument been young as it was old, it could scarcely have proved otherwise. The practice of Kalkbrenner’s exercises for a few hours per diem, to say nothing of agonized attempts to hammer out operatic airs “simply arranged for young beginners,” and national melodies arranged for no one in particular, had naturally exercised a somewhat detrimental influence upon the hammers.

“Now, Curran,” said Mrs. Wright, “if you do not keep quiet, I shall send you

out of the room ;” whereupon Curran made a hideous face at Rosie, who immediately burst into shrill shrieks of laughter.

“ You naughty boy ! ” Mrs. Wright was beginning, when the opening bars of the piece Miss Miles had selected literally stopped her utterance.

No “ trying back ” now—no fumbling amongst the intricacies of unfamiliar notes—no mistakes between sharps and flats—no slurring over difficult passages.

A thorough musician had her hands on the keys, and the old piano knew this, and gave out under her touch such tone and power as time and ill-usage had still left in its frame.

Ordinarily, it was a cracked, vibrating-stringed, feeble-voiced instrument, the notes of which rattled while suffering at the hands of the Misses Wright, like

loose teeth ; but that evening it seemed to have renewed its youth once more, and answered to the clamour of martial music—to the hurrying of many feet—to the steady, stately march of an advancing army—to the melody of exultation and the lament of sorrow.

For suddenly the key changed into a minor, and then the piano told a story of such woe and such tenderness—of such sweet sadness, such subtle longing regret—that its own weakness and age were forgotten in the pathetic beauty of the recited tale.

“Exquisite ! exquisite !—char—ming !” exclaimed Mr. Wright, who did indeed consider he had listened to a performance as wonderful as unexpected.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Wright ; and the Rector, looking at her, knew something was wrong.

“What is the name of that?” asked Miss Maria, who had hung about the piano, trying, perhaps, to “catch the knack,” as fond mothers sometimes counsel their darlings to do.

As for Rosie and Curran, they both sat with their eyes and mouths wide open, precisely as they might have sat had the house been coming down about their ears. They were frightened into good behaviour. When that old piano, which they had thumped with no gentle hands themselves, took to making such a noise, what might not happen next?

“And all without any turning over, too,” secretly thought Curran, who had hitherto regarded that part of the performance as essential to success.

“You sing, I am sure,” said Mr. Wright, as Miss Miles, after dreamily touching a few chords, was about to leave

the instrument. "If you are not too tired, pray favour us with one little song."

Miss Miles laughed, and resumed her seat. For a few seconds her fingers wandered over the notes, as if uncertain of the air they should select; then she began the accompaniment to that which, if not the sweetest of all Irish melodies, is, at all events, sweet exceedingly—"Luggelaw," mated by Moore to words flowing and graceful.

The drawing-room at Fisherton was one well adapted for hearing music to advantage, and in the silence of that summer's evening the singer's voice throbbled through the apartment, filling each remote corner with melody and pathos.

For a moment after the last note died away there ensued a dead silence, which Mrs. Wright broke by saying—

“ You have an exquisite voice, and sing beautifully. Dion, will you ring for candles? I think it must be nearly time for prayers. Maria, close the piano;” which was a blow to Maria, as she had been hovering about the instrument, in hopes of being requested to play “ *Il mio Tesoro.*”

Mrs. Wright, however, was a clever woman, and thought it better to defer the revelation of her daughter’s accomplishments to some future occasion.

She had expected a Miss Miles, but not the Miss Miles who appeared at Fisher-ton.

She had expected a vague “miss,” with little vanities, little affectations, little knowledge, a smattering of learning, but for this girl-woman she was not prepared; and Mrs. Wright felt she must reconsider the position.

And for this reason Mrs. Wright when discomfited over Miss Miles' instrumental performances, and astonished at her singing, fell back upon her own lines, and suggested that safest of all manœuvres, prayers.

Which stopped further hostilities and surprises for the time, and gave her the night to organize and reflect.

“ Well, my dear,” said the Reverend Dion, when, the family all in bed, he and his wife sat *tête-à-tête* in the study—Mr. Wright imbibing that tumbler of punch, made out of the best Irish whisky—whisky the friend who sent it knew had never paid the Queen a halfpenny—which often wooed sleep to visit the rectorial pillow, when otherwise she might have been requested long enough and vainly enough to do so—“ Well, my dear, and what do you think of Miss Bella Miles ? ”

“I do not know what to think,” answered Mrs. Wright.

“Of course, of course,” agreed the Rector. “It is indeed early to form an opinion as to her heart and disposition.” Here Mr. Wright handed his wife a wine-glassful of the subtle beverage contained in his own tumbler. “What do you think of her looks?” he ventured.

“Well, I don’t think she is quite my style, Dion,” answered the lady, with an engaging rounding of one shoulder, and the old trick of lifting her chin in the air, and casting her eyes over it, or trying to do so, which had rendered Miss Curran so irresistible at hunt and yacht balls in the days when she had lovers galore, and proposers were few as primroses at Christmas. “Some people—some men”—this last statement with a shake of the worn curls, and a smile that long and severe

service had not deprived of all its coquetish charm—"admire that sort of face, I am aware; but still, Dion dear, confess that, beside our Maria, for instance, Miss Miles lacks that sweet, guileless look which seems to me—but perhaps I am foolish—to be the exclusive possession of a girl who has been carefully brought up at home, under the eye of a loving mother——"

"Ah, my dear! there are few mothers like you," said Mr. Wright—which was perhaps fortunate, if England were to support her population. "And I knew you would feel attached to this poor orphan girl. She has nice manners, I think."

"Unformed," remarked Mrs. Wright.

"Well, she has not been accustomed to society," observed the Rector. "You will form her, Selina."

“I will do my best for her in every way,” said Mrs. Wright. “But, do you know, she strikes me as being very reserved—and—and—odd.”

“Perhaps so,” was the reply. “She is in a strange place, and no doubt things do seem odd to her at first.”

“That may be; and yet I think no Irish girl would have risen from table as she did to-night when I spoke about that butter.”

“I think I once knew an Irish girl who would have run on any one’s errand when I used to sit at her father’s table,” said Mr. Wright, throwing a dash of sentiment into his voice as he looked at his wife and mixed himself another tumbler.

“You foolish Dion! Are you so fond of your old wife still that you care to remember those times?”

“If I had not you and the children to be fond of, how could I bear my life?” he answered gallantly, forgetful of the fact that without either he might at least have been free from debt; and for reply she laid her hand on his, and Mr. Wright knew an impending storm had been averted, and that Miss Miles’ advent would pass over without boisterous weather ensuing.

“She will be of use to the girls in their music,” remarked Mr. Wright, after a pause. “They can play duets, and that sort of thing together, eh?”

“I am not quite sure,” said the lady doubtfully, “whether her style of playing is quite correct in a private person. Professionals and those kind of people,” added Mrs. Wright, with a wave of her hand towards the window, signifying that “those kind” dwelt somewhere outside

Fisherton Rectory, "have to deal in effects; but I doubt whether I should care to have a child of ours exhibiting herself as Miss Miles did this evening. It is all very fine and Frenchified, no doubt; but I am afraid it is not feminine. And beyond all things, Dion, I should like our girls to be feminine."

If Mr. Wright had expressed his secret feelings at that moment, he would have said that he thought their girls were too feminine already, in the way of fine-ladyism and uselessness; but it was a rule of husband and wife, and not a bad one, to praise their offspring and each other, for which reason he murmured, "Bless them all," including mentally in that blessing the lonely girl, to whom his heart, or at least as much of it as debt had left under his own control, had gone out in sympathy.

“Do you think her French will be any good?” he inquired after a pause, the “her” referring, as Mrs. Wright understood, to Miss Miles.

“I must first see what books she has brought with her,” explained Mrs. Wright, as though a young lady leaving school were likely to have a library of immoral novels hidden in her trunks. The Rector’s wife had been reading up Racine and Molière, “La Henriade” and “Charles the Twelfth,” as a good preliminary to conversing with Miss Miles in the language of Voltaire; but, after five minutes of the young lady’s society, she decided to eschew every tongue save English.

More especially as she had her doubts about Miss Miles’ English. Mrs. Wright was a very shrewd and observant woman, and, after she had lain down in bed and

Mr. Wright was more than half asleep, she woke him up by saying :

“ I wonder, Dion, if that girl is quite right about her H's ? ”

“ About her what ? ” asked poor Mr. Wright, divided in his mind between burglary and the breaking of the Seventh Commandment.

“ About the letter H, ” explained Mrs. Wright. “ It seemed to me she made a mess of it once or twice this evening, more especially when she was singing. I am quite certain she said—

‘ Then came that voice when all forsaken
This 'eart long 'ad sleeping lain. ’ ”

“ Tush ! that is French, ” retorted Mr. Wright, fresh from Paris. “ I do wish you would let me go to sleep. ”

And thus exhorted, Mrs. Wright said no more—then.

Within three days, however, she was

able to assure the Reverend Dion her instincts had, as usual, been true. In this wise, knowledge came to her. Fine weather and sunshine once again prevailed, and whilst Mrs. Wright sat on her garden-chair reading the latest novel of that year, Miss Miles at a little distance squatted on the grass, her fingers employed on some delicate embroidery, her thoughts probably far enough away.

After they had remained thus silent for about half an hour, Master Curran, stealing softly across the lawn, came with a bound behind Miss Miles, and, with a sudden "Bo-o," clasped both hands round her neck. Then came the revelation.

"Don't you—don't you, Curran!" cried the girl, in an access of nervous irritation. "You know I can't a-bear to be frightened."

Mrs. Wright dropped her book, and took up her eye-glass.

“My dear child,” she asked, “where did you learn English?”

Miss Miles made no reply; but her head drooped over her work, her fingers flew more rapidly in and out of the fine cambric, and a glow spread from throat to forehead.

That night Mrs. Wright, not without a certain sense of triumph, informed her husband she considered it would be only her duty to cease conversing in French entirely, to the end that Miss Miles might be taught “how English is spoken in a certain rank of English Society.”

CHAPTER III.

A SPECIMEN DAY AT FISHERTON.

TIME passed on, and Miss Miles had settled down into her place at Fisherton Rectory. She was already one of the family. The boys called her Bella, and the girls "dear," and Mr. and Mrs. Wright called her both. Mrs. Wright had borrowed all her money, and the young ladies had tried on each separate article of dress she possessed, and admired some of her few ornaments so much that she requested their acceptance of those which took their fancy.

Mr. Irwin had sent down a new piano for her benefit ; and though a rule was made that the instrument should be locked and the key kept either in the pocket of Mrs. Wright or Miss Miles, still the key was so generally not in Miss Miles' custody and out of that of Mrs. Wright, that the rule became nugatory, and the children worked their sweet will upon this full-compass Collard, as they had done upon the old six-and-a-half-octave Broadwood.

Occasionally Mr. Wright would remonstrate when he found Curran playing a tune with one sticky finger which left black marks on the note, or Rosie thumping the new keys with all the might of her little fat fists ; but remonstrating in that house produced much the same effect as addressing the wind, and Miss Miles knew this, and wished

Mr. Wright would not speak about the matter.

On the new instrument Maria and her sisters practised, and Miss Miles helped them with their music, and “put them in the way”—so Mrs. Wright defined the matter—of learning fresh pieces; and some duets were procured, of which Maria played the bass and Miss Miles the treble, and when Mr. Wright was easy in his mind, which was not often, he beat time approvingly, and said “the performance was cha-ming.”

As for French, Miss Miles would have talked it willingly enough, had any one wished to hear her discourse in that language, which she soon found no one did.

“Had it been Latin, now, or Greek,” said Mr. Wright, with a merry twinkle in his eye, which showed that the humour of

the position was not lost upon him, "I could have met you upon equal ground; but French is too modern a language, and parley-vousing would be more of a toil than a pleasure to me."

Nevertheless Mr. Wright picked up a few French phrases from their visitor, and produced them upon occasion, not without effect. As for Mrs. Wright, she directed herself to the improvement of Miss Miles' English.

"You had better, my love," she said to that young lady, "write me each day a letter recording the events of the previous day, and then I will mark any errors I may find and leave you to correct them."

Which was very good policy on the part of Mrs. Wright, as in many cases she would scarcely have known how to correct them herself.

Each morning, directly after breakfast, or at least as soon after breakfast as the Rector started on his round of parochial visiting, Miss Miles took possession of his study and wrote her letter to Mrs. Wright. When, as happened not unfrequently, Mr. Wright came back to indite some forgotten epistle, or to search for some paper, or to look for some book, he always said—

“Scribbling still, my dear! why, what a wealth of incident you must find at Fisherton,” or made other remarks of a similarly innocent description.

There were some events, however, which Miss Miles did not chronicle. She did not state the number of buttons she sewed on the Rector's shirts; the state of order in which she kept his gloves, the rents she repaired in his surplices, the strings she stitched on his

bands. It was not much she had it in her power to do for the Rector; but what she did perform seemed very pleasant to a man who had always before been compelled to pause in his dressing, to shout for Selina or one of the servants to come to his assistance. No shouting now was required. Even to the loop on his umbrella, to the stitch needed where the silk had given from the wire, Miss Miles saw to his little wants.

And the Rector, who liked to go out looking trim and neat, faultless as regarded his linen, and sound in gloves as in orthodoxy, felt grateful to the girl who, paying them money for her keep, still did work which no servant had ever thought it worth her while to perform.

Naturally Mr. Irwin felt anxious to know how his niece liked her new home, how she got on with her studies, how she

amused herself, what acquaintances she made, and so forth. And by way of answering all his questions, which were neither few nor far between, the young lady hit upon the device of sending him each week her letters to Mrs. Wright, which letters answered all the purposes of an objective diary.

Mrs. Wright had at a very early period of the exercises noticed that nothing of a subjective character occurred even in a single passage. Miss Miles might have been the reporter of a daily paper, so much did she say about others and so little about herself. For the gushing sentimentalism of sweet seventeen Mrs. Wright looked in vain; for any evidence of thought she scanned the written pages without success. An observant girl, able to remember the events of each day and chronicle them faithfully, but able at the same

time to keep her opinion of those events well in the background.

“She is deep,” decided Mrs. Wright, “and I fancy has a vein of sarcasm about her. Now, what does she mean by some passages in this letter?”—which the lady knew was meant as much for Mr. Irwin’s information as for her own perusal.

“Tuesday.

“MY DEAR MRS. WRIGHT,

“I woke up early yesterday morning, and having got out of bed to look at the first snow of this season, decided on dressing and going downstairs. There, to my amazement, I found Nurse Mary, who explained the extraordinary *phenomenon* by stating ‘she had not slept a wink all night with the tooth-ache.’

“I asked her why she did not have the

tooth out, and she replied that 'she did not want to lose her mark of mouth before her time.'

"When I offered to make some creosote out of a *Times* newspaper and cure her toothache, she received the suggestion with incredulity, and asked if I thought myself cleverer than Doctor Ryan, who said there was no cure for toothache except having the tooth out, unless it might be 'filling the mouth with cold water and sitting on the fire till it boiled.'

"We had a cup of tea together beside the kitchen fire, and the consequence of our mutual early rising proved to be that Mr. Wright was not called till half an hour later than usual.

"Wrote my letter to you before breakfast. After breakfast we were all very busy perfecting Colonel Leschelles'

room. We made it quite smart with chintz and muslin, almost too beautiful, Nurse thinks, for sleeping purposes.

“Contradictory accounts are given of this Colonel Leschelles. Maria, *she* says he is at least a hundred, that he dyes his hair and wears stays, that he cannot endure the sight of a young person, and that the boys always light a bonfire when he leaves the house. Rosie, on the contrary, declares he is a ‘sweet sweet man’; and Clara informed me as a strict secret that she is engaged to marry him when she is sixteen, that he has promised not to grow a day older until she has attained that age, and that it is agreed she is to have as much Everton toffee and as many peaches as she can eat. Curran declines to express any opinion till he knows what sort of a present the Colonel means to make him this Christmas. Mr. Wright

speaks warmly of the coming visitor as 'a fine old English gentleman,' but Julia declares he ought to be sent to Madame Tussaud's in the character of an ancient beau. He is expected to arrive laden with gifts on Christmas Eve.

"After we had done up his room (the looking-glass is dressed with new book muslin tied back with blue ribbon to match the blue convolvulus on the chintz) it was time for dinner.

"Mr. Wright being in London, Curran offered to say grace in his stead, and though Mrs. Wright declined to allow this, he insisted at a later period upon telling us what he meant to have said. He had heard Roderick repeating it to Frank.

'One word's as good as ten,
Go ahead—Amen.'

"For this misdemeanour he was de-

prived of his pudding, when he at once made matters worse by saying he was very glad not to have to eat it. If we knew what cook had put in it, we would not eat it either.

“When dinner was finished we went to the vestry to finish our wreaths, etc., for decorating the church. Many ladies *where* there, young and old. Miss Faint has arrived at the conclusion that holly pricks her fingers, and Miss Bolton is of opinion Mr. Wright ought to have a curate; she says a parish is dull without one, and that coming and going they make a pleasant change.

“We returned home tired and thirsty to tea, and found Mr. Wright at home with Curran beside him eating bread and jam. The child had waited for his papa at the gate, and stolen a march by telling him about his delinquencies, which Mr.

Wright, upon promise of better behaviour, forgave; Curran then demanded bread and jam.

“Nurse waylaid me on the stairs to say if I really thought that ‘concrete’ would do her any good, she ‘did not mind’ letting me try it.

“Five minutes afterwards Mr. Wright rang the bell to know if the house was on fire.

“Two minutes later and Nurse was screaming out that I had poisoned and destroyed her, and entreating in a breath that her master would save her soul and preserve her life.

“As Roderick remarked—it was Satan casting out Beelzebub. This morning she declares the pain has moved out of her tooth on to her tongue.

“I think I have now exhausted all the news you would think it desirable

for me to chronicle, and trusting your headache is much better,

“ Believe me, dear Mrs. Wright,

“ Yours affectionately,

“ B. MILES.”

Pencil in hand, Mrs. Wright sat pondering this letter rather than correcting it.

In addition to the news reported by hers affectionately B. Miles, there had been two annoying affairs with the servants and three persistent and most offensive duns. Mr. Wright had returned from London out of sorts, and Mrs. Wright had, as implied, gone to bed with a headache. All these things, except only the headache, Miss Miles had omitted, but quite enough remained in her letter to decide Mrs. Wright on selecting some other form of education than that of correspondence.

“It was my own fault,” the Rector’s wife argued; “I ought never to have suggested the reproduction of domestic and family gossip. Had I done my duty properly, I should have insisted on her writing an essay every day, and so educated her powers of thought instead of her powers of observation, which are far too keen already.”

“My dear,” she said, bringing forward once again the graces of her youth that had, according to Mr. Wright, turned the heads of all the marriageable and eligible men of Dublin in the days when she too was in her teens, “I think you have now so much improved your colloquial English that these letters may be discontinued. You had better take a fortnight’s holiday, and then, after the new year has fairly set in, we can consider the subjects upon which it will

be most to your mental advantage to write."

In reply, Miss Miles simply bowed, and, taking her manuscript, corrected those passages which Mrs. Wright had pencilled as being capable of improvement.

"You have amended your errors very quickly and well," said Mrs. Wright, glancing over the sheet and handing it back again.

Miss Miles, with a pleasant "Thank you," received the letter, and at once tore it into slips, and placed the morsels under the grate.

"My dear," cried Mrs. Wright, "what are you doing?"

"Only burning some useless paper," answered Miss Miles quietly.

Mrs. Wright paused for a minute, then she remarked, "I hope, Bella—I do hope—you have not a bad temper."

“I hope not,” was the reply, “I do not think I have. I only burnt this letter because I fancied—forgive me if I am wrong—you did not want my uncle to read it.”

“My child, you are very foolish,” said Mrs. Wright in her most matronly manner. “I trust nothing ever occurs at Fisherton Rectory which I should care for the whole world knowing.”

“And if there were,” retorted Miss Miles, her cheeks aflame and her head erect, “I trust you know such things would never be repeated by me. I have never mentioned even the merest trifle to my uncle I thought you and Mr. Wright might like me to keep secret. If I know little else, I know, at least, when to remain silent.” And then and there she burst into a passion of tears.

“Bella—Bella, what is the matter?”

exclaimed Mrs. Wright. "What have I said or done to cause you such grief?"

"Nothing—nothing," replied the girl for answer. "Only sometimes I cannot forget. I cannot."

"Forget what?" asked Mrs. Wright.

"Do not ask me. Nothing I can tell you or any one," was the answer. And Miss Miles left the room, leaving Mrs. Wright in a state of bewilderment impossible to describe.

"I have it," at length decided that astute lady. "Her mother or her father was mad, and she knows it. She has all the cleverness and secrecy of insanity, and the malady will break out some day in her. I must speak to Dion about this."

But when she did speak to Dion, he only said, "Pshaw! Selina, the girl has all her wits, believe me. There is a

mystery, doubtless, but we were not sent into the world to solve it. Let us make what we can out of Mr. Irwin, and thank Heaven for the windfall, without troubling ourselves too much concerning the ins and outs of affairs that are no business of ours."

CHAPTER IV.

INTRODUCES COLONEL LESCHELLES..

COLONEL LESCHELLES, for whose benefit the spare bedroom of Fisherton Rectory—Miss Miles' bedroom, in short—had been duly prepared, as narrated by that young lady, was an old friend of the Wrights—so old a friend, indeed, that the Rector declared the date of his first acquaintance with the Colonel was enshrouded in the mists of memory.

This is a good way some people have of forgetting the number of years which could be counted since they first made

the acquaintance of this distinguished statesman or that admirable millionaire. They could tell to a day, I will warrant, when they first met poor Tom Styles, or Jack Oakes forced his company upon them; but it is really so long since they first knew Rothschild, and Baring, and the rest of the plutocracy, that the exact date has been rubbed, by the mere action of time, off Recollection's tablets.

It would not have required, however, any extraordinary amount of thought to enable Mr. Wright to state precisely the Christmas Eve on which he made Colonel Leschelles' acquaintance.

Had he chosen to do so, he could have told any inquirer the date, year, and hour when he set eyes for the first time on that gallant officer. He was at that period curate in a parish situated well away to

the east of London, in the middle of the marshes, with no resident vicar, one resident squire, a scattered population of about a couple of hundred souls, an old church, a full graveyard—ague to the south, fever to the north, bronchitis to the east, and rheumatism and consumption pervading the west almost exclusively, and spreading to the other three-quarters when inclination or business called one or both diseases thither.

“For eleven weary months,” to quote Mr. Wright’s own words, “I vegetated in that slough of despond, most part of the time wifeless and childless. Except in the summer, I preached to about half-a-dozen of a congregation; there was not an educated man in the parish but one, and he was an atheist. As for the Squire, he had not an idea beyond horses, dogs, fat cattle, and good investments.

He had plenty of money ; but he spent as little as he could. He never entertained. During the whole time I had charge he never asked me to his house, or offered me a glass of wine when I called. The stipend, however, was good, as well it might be, and the duty light—if it had been heavy, I could not have performed it. I kept my health wonderfully, and Selina and the children kept theirs, at a distance. I lived at the vicarage, and the woman who was left in care of the furniture attended to my wants. Besides this woman, who was deaf, I never exchanged a word with any human being after my rounds were finished for the day, and the curtains were drawn and the shutters closed. Sometimes, when the flat marsh lands were covered deep in snow, or lay under water, and the wind came howling up from the German Ocean

across those dreary wilds, I have sat by the fire in the old vicar's study, and imagined how a man might hang himself, or take to drink, or go mad, living alone in such a spot."

Even to such a spot, however, Christmas Eve came—such a Christmas Eve! The wind, after having blown for about three months from the east, as is the habit of the wind in those forlorn regions, suddenly changed to the south, and brought with it, on the twenty-fourth of December, in that especial year of grace, such a fall of snow as was unparalleled in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, a certain Job Groom, who had, as man and boy, worked upon the farm and lands owned by Squire Olier and Squire Olier's forefathers for sixty-five years.

"There had been a very heavy fall of snow," so said Job, "the night Master

Samuel was born ;” and now there came a heavier fall, and Master Samuel, the Squire, was—quite in his prime, as it seemed to Job—dying ; and, unless the weather changed greatly, Job did not see how he was ever to be buried. Job could remember that at the time of the heavy snow when Master Samuel was born, graves could not be dug at all ; and Job, sorry for his master’s impending death, was still more sorry he should have selected such weather for flitting from this world to the next.

So Squire Olier lay dying. His house stood low, even for that low-lying district ; and he had drunk heavily for many years past, in order to banish ague, and perhaps also because he liked strong liquors. The doctor, who came from the nearest town to attend him, said that he had drunk too much, and that brandy

and hollands had between them signed his death-warrant.

Upon the other hand, the doctor said if he had not drunk so much he would probably not have lived so long. He made this remark to Mr. Wright while he and that gentleman were having something hot in the dining-room upon the especial Christmas Eve of which I am speaking, when Squire Olier was speeding to eternity with greater haste than he had ever ridden on his good horse Rochester back from hounds or market, with the sharp east wind cutting his head off, or the driving sleet beating in his eyes and blinding him.

“I shall not go just yet,” said the doctor. “Though I can be of no more use, I am afraid, still I may just as well wait for half an hour. Who succeeds, do you know?”

“It depends on his will,” answered the Curate. “The place is his own, to bequeath to you or me, if he were so inclined. The heir he fixed on, however, I believe, offended him, and he has sent, I know, for I wrote the letter, at his request, to some man—an officer, not long returned from India—that I fancy he had half a notion of willing most of his property to. But the Colonel tarries; and if he had not tarried, I suppose our poor friend has been in no fit state to execute a will for days past.”

They sat silent for a time over the fire in that dark wainscoted room. Without, the snow continued to fall softly; upstairs the Squire lay insensible. In the kitchen, servants, house and farm, huddled together round the hearth, reading warnings in the blaze of the wood fire, and seeing winding-sheets in the guttering

candles. At every sound they started; and when occasionally one of the two women attending on the dying Squire crept downstairs, they looked at her as if she had come from another world.

There was no mistress at the farm, there had never been in Squire Samuel's time, and the servants spoke in hushed tones of some cruel disappointment in early life, which had kept the once-young master single, and changed the whole course and meaning of his life.

In the parlour, the doctor and clergyman touched on the same subject; and Mr. Wright said he understood the lady—dead and dust long before—had been a sister of this very Colonel Leschelles, and a cousin of Mr. Olier's.

“Though he has lived the life of a boor, he comes of a good family, I believe,” added the Curate; and he was about to

enlarge upon this theme, when the doctor said, "Hush!" and rising, walked towards the door, which was opened at that moment by one of the watchers.

"Will you come upstairs, please, sir?" she asked. "He is very bad."

Thereupon doctor and clergyman proceeded to the sick-chamber, where they found Squire Olier so bad that he never could be worse.

The doctor did what lay in his power to soothe him; but his power was literally *nil*.

"It is almost the last struggle," he whispered to Mr. Wright. "All will soon be over."

And still the snow fell softly, and the graves in the distant churchyard were covered, like the dead, from sight; and Mr. Wright, with a great sense of pity for the human loneliness of the dying man,

knelt by the bedside and prayed, till the doctor, touching his shoulder, said—

“He has gone, poor fellow! He is past any help of ours.”

At the same instant there was a peal at the front-door bell, immediately followed by a rush of cold air into the house and a sound of talking in the hall. Then, as Mr. Wright descended the staircase, a servant met him and announced that Colonel Leschelles had come.

Mr. Wright, re-entering the parlour, found standing before the fire a tall, thin man—military, unquestionably—elderly, presumably—a man who came to the point at once by asking, “Am I in time?”

“He is dead!” answered the Curate; and for a minute not a word was uttered. Then the Colonel spoke—

“I received a letter written by a Mr. Wright——”

“I am Mr. Wright,” explained the Curate.

“But only late last night, as it has been following me from place to place,” continued the Colonel, acknowledging the information with a bow. “I have been travelling ever since. I should like to have seen him alive once more. Poor Samuel! we were good friends many a long year ago.” And there ensued another pause, broken this time by Mr. Wright, who told the officer his cousin had been virtually dead for some days previously, and that no speed he could have made, even had the letter reached him in regular course, would have enabled him to arrive in time.

“I am glad to know that,” replied the other; “for I should have liked to comply with his last request, if possible.”

At this juncture the doctor came in to

tell Mr. Wright he was going, and to say he would inform Mr. Olier's solicitor of his client's death. Then the doctor inquired if it was Colonel Leschelles' intention to remain in the house.

"I suppose I must," said the Colonel ruefully. "If I were ever so much tempted to desert my post, I do not think, considering the road we have travelled, I should feel inclined to retrace it. I hired a conveyance to bring me here, and I suppose the driver can put up for the night. It is not weather in which to turn a dog out, or——"

"Anybody except a doctor," finished the other. "Doctors are supposed to be weatherproof; but if I mean to get home at all, I must be off now."

"Better stay at the vicarage," suggested Mr. Wright.

"Only wish I could," was the reply;

“if I did my wife would be fancying all manner of evil; and, besides, some patient will be sure to want me. Patients always do fall ill on Church holidays and snowy nights; but take the Colonel home with you, Mr. Wright. He will be far better and more comfortable away from here. Take him with you.”

“Ay, that I will, if he is only willing to come,” said Mr. Wright, laying a persuasive hand on the officer’s sleeve as the doctor left the room. “Listen to me, Colonel; you will be miserable here, I know. The servants are upset; and if they were not, they would not be of much use to you. You can be of no service to our poor friend upstairs. Come with me to the vicarage, where I am, in the absence of my wife and children, leading a bachelor life. You can be as much alone as you like. The house is warm, if it is

nothing else. I can give you a snug bit of supper to-night, and cut you a slice out of as fine a turkey as ever came to table to-morrow. Say you will come. Upon my honour I shall be as glad of your company as I should of that of my own brother."

Which, if the Colonel had known everything, would not have seemed a strong way of putting the matter. Nevertheless Mr. Wright was quite in earnest over his invitation. He would have killed a fatted calf for his guest's benefit, had such an animal been running loose about the vicarage straw-yard, rather than let his captive go.

Colonel Leschelles looked round the dark parlour; he surveyed the gloomy wainscot of the room, the heavy, old-fashioned haircloth-covered chairs, the worn sofa, the unsnuffed candles, the

hearth strewn with wood-ashes, and thought of what an evening, companionless, in that house was likely to prove, with no living soul he could ask to relieve his loneliness downstairs, with the memory of the dead lying stiff and silent upstairs; and he decided in favour of the vicarage.

“You are very kind,” he said, speaking to Mr. Wright; “and I will avail myself of your proffered hospitality; but first I should like to see it.”

“You would like to be alone, probably,” suggested Mr. Wright as he led the way upstairs.

“Yes, if you please,” was the answer. And so the two men who had parted in youth met again in age.

With the memories which thronged through Colonel Leschelles' mind, as he stood looking at the face no longer dis-

torted with pain, over which the peace of death was rapidly stealing, we have no concern. There was no remorse, at any rate, in the officer's heart. The quarrel, in whatever cause it may have originated, was not of his seeking, and at any time he would have made it up. Farther, he had obeyed his cousin's request the moment he received his message, and he had been ready, knowing nothing of the dead man's pecuniary intentions towards himself to hold out the right hand of fellowship, and tell his kinsman that in his heart there rankled no bitterness, no feeling, save good-will and charity.

All too late, however, thought the Colonel, as he stood regarding the changed face of the cousin who had loved his sister; and it was consequently a grave man and a depressed who, half an hour later, apologized to Mr. Wright for having

detained him for so long a time, and signified his readiness to accompany the Curate home.

That night Mr. Wright, depressed and out of sorts himself, let his visitor alone. He gave him good cheer, it is true; but he did not enter into much conversation. What talk they had was about the late Squire and his relatives, and the life he had led, and the life he might have led; and as neither found any one of those topics entertaining, they bade each other good-night, and went to bed early.

Next morning both arose in better spirits, and looked out over a white world glittering and sparkling under the beams of a winter sun.

“The finest Christmas Day I can ever remember,” said Mr. Wright, rubbing his hands and looking at the ruddy glow of the fire, and listening contentedly to the

bubbling of the urn. "The labourers from the farm were at work by daybreak, and have cut a road to the church, so we may get something of a congregation, after all. Will you come with me, or keep at home beside the fire?"

The Colonel elected to go with Mr. Wright, who picked out a very good sermon from a pile already yellow with age, and delivered it admirably. He touched very feelingly upon the death that had taken place so recently; and though he said little concerning the late Squire, still he said as much as it was possible for any one to say in his praise.

After service was over, Mr. Wright and his visitor returned to the vicarage, where, in due time, that turkey spoken of in commendatory terms was placed smoking on the board.

"You see your dinner?" remarked

Mr. Wright. And the Colonel was fain to remark he saw a very good dinner indeed, which was rendered none the worse by the addition of some capital punch, in the brewing of which Mr. Wright was a proficient. The punchbowl was not produced till the old cook had removed the remains of the turkey and disappeared with the almost untasted pudding. Then Mr. Wright produced "his materials," and compounded a beverage which the Colonel declared to be "perfect," and which he sipped, looking at the upheaped fire and listening to Mr. Wright's talk.

In those days the Curate could talk. Debt had not then been sitting upon him for so long a time, as was the case at Fisherton. Children had come and gone; but his mental elasticity was almost as great as ever. Duns had been pressing,

and Selina's health was often delicate, but the buoyancy of his youth still remained, and the evil days which came upon him at last, of regarding all men as mere possible chances from which to borrow money, had not yet arrived.

So Mr. Wright, who was perhaps always a little more loquacious to any chance guest, or at any hospitable table, when Selina and the dear children were absent, and he living *en garçon*, unfolded his experience budget for Colonel Leschelles' benefit.

He wanted to rouse the officer from his depression, and he did it. He wished to see him laugh, or, if that were impossible, smile; and he made him both laugh and smile.

He told him stories of Dublin life, and of his own life at Trinity—then so merry and witty a college—recited profane

anecdotes concerning bishops and archbishops! told how the Church in Ireland had been neglected, and expressed his own conviction that it was hard to feel energetic in a country where nineteenth-twentieths of the population were either Presbyterians or Roman Catholics; had his fling at the absentee clergy, who he said were even worse than the absentee landlords; citing, as an example, the case of a rector, who, starting in the morning with the bishop of the diocese on a visit to his parish, drove about till evening without finding it, gravely assuring his lordship, when compelled to give up the search, he had been "once there, and was quite astonished he could not remember the way to it again."

"And yet there was a considerable amount of Christian feeling at that time among the various denominations," con-

tinued Mr. Wright, "which I doubt does not prevail now.

"No dinner-party then was complete without the priest, and good stories they gave, never fear, in return for their entertainment. No men were such storytellers as they. Why, every gentleman's house was open to the priests, who were right jolly fellows, until after Catholic Emancipation; and well-educated and gentlemanly too, many of them, which is more than could be said nowadays. If the dissenting ministers were not asked to mix freely with the landed gentry, it was only because in country districts many of them had come from the plough, and because the better educated and those born in town were just like Samson's foxes, running a-muck against Churchmen and Romanists alike.

"Still, even between the Presbyterians

and the Church people—the Regium Donum and the Tithes, as we used to dub them—a kindly feeling sometimes prevailed. I remember once, when I was a boy, staying with some relatives of mine in the North. They were Presbyterians, stiff-necked as the perverse generation, and bigoted as Mussulmen, so, of course, I had to go to ‘meeting’ with them, and stand out those interminable prayers, and sit while psalms fifty verses long were sung in unison through their noses, and listen to sermons which they said were full of pith, but which seemed to me full only of repetitions.

“We used to muster a goodly company, for there was only one Roman Catholic family in the parish, and not more than fifty Church people. All the women went to meeting with their Bibles wrapped round in unfolded pocket-handkerchiefs,

and all the men wore black clothes about three sizes too large for them.

“The men and the women walked in separate detachments. Four or so of one sex walked together, taking up the entire side-walk and sometimes the whole road, and then came four or less of the other sex walking by themselves.

“They were very strict in all the relations of life, and part of their religion was to keep the footpath against all comers.

“The clergyman of the parish was of course non-resident. He lived many miles distant near a pleasant town, where he had a nice house, good society, and a fine library.

“It is said that a matter-of-fact bishop once wrote to him to know whether he considered his books or the souls of his flock of the most importance, to which he silyly replied—

“‘I apprehend, my lord, there can be no doubt about the matter. My books, of course.’

“He and his clerk rode over the hills to perform one service on Sundays, that is, unless the day happened to be very wet indeed, in which case, after waiting for half an hour, the congregation quietly dispersed, some going to ‘meeting,’ others home, and those who had friends pretty well to do near at hand accepting invitations to ‘take an air of the fire’ and a drop of something to keep the cold out.

“By all ranks the Rector was greatly liked. When he did come among his people, he was pleasant to them, and to the dissenters and the one Roman Catholic family. He had a royal memory, and never made mistakes about names. He was ready with a joke for the mothers, with

a kind word with the men, with a sly compliment for the girls, and pats on the head, and sometimes halfpence, for the curly-pated, bare-footed, straight-limbed children disporting themselves in the village horse-pond and the familiar gutters. True, the minister often had a rap at the clergyman of the Established Church for taking money and doing no work, but his people did not attach much importance to these remarks. Paying for their sittings, being asked to contribute to collections, being called upon for money when their children had to be baptized or themselves married, seemed much harder to them than the payment of tithes, which usually came out of their landlords' pockets.

“At all times the Rector was willing to christen for nothing, marry for nothing, ay, and often as not to give the

newly-wedded a trifle with which to begin housekeeping; and so, as I have said, he was popular, more especially as it was well known he 'could take his glass just like one of themselves.'

"To a parish some few miles distant had come a clergyman of quite another stamp. An Englishman with an English wife, both of whom were cordially hated. He, for wanting to make converts; she, for wishing the people to keep themselves and their houses clean. He gave blankets and tracts to the Roman Catholics, and their priest told them to burn the tracts and keep the blankets, adding, 'God knows, poor souls! this weather you have need of them.'

"He gave straw bonnets and cotton frocks to the Presbyterian children, and was astonished to find they donned those articles of attire only in order to attend

the Sunday-schools attached to their own meeting-house.

“He preached alternate Sundays against the Roman Catholics and the dissenters, and was not sparing upon those of his own cloth who folded their hands in idleness and said, ‘Peace when there was no peace.’

“This was the man who stood waiting for the rector of our parish one stormy winter’s morning, and who, as the old clerical cob came in sight, advanced to meet his friend.

“‘How do, Agnew?’ he began. ‘My steeple was blown down last night, and as we could not possibly have any service, I thought I would come over and preach for you.’

“‘I am sure I am greatly obliged to you,’ answered our rector. In telling the story afterwards, which he did at many

a dinner-table, he said he would as soon have seen the gentleman with a cloven hoof as the man who greeted him. Nay, I am wrong, he said he would rather have seen *Il Diavolo*; but, however, he felt he must put a good face on the matter, and so he got down off his cob, and the clerk dismounted from his pony, and they all went into the vestry together, where the Englishman proceeded to robe himself decorously, while our rector flung on his surplice, as was his fashion, anyhow.

““ You don't get much of a congregation here, I suppose? ” remarked the stranger.

““ Oh! pretty well; all things considered, I cannot complain. ”

““ There don't seem many here yet, ” said the Englishman, peeping through the chinks of the vestry door.

“ ‘We always give them a few minutes’ grace,’ observed the Rector; ‘and I dare say they will be late such a boisterous morning as this.’

“ Having made which excuse, he passed out into the churchyard and accosted a member of the constabulary force who chanced at that moment to be passing the vestry window.

“ ‘Mr. Jeckey,’ says he, ‘I am in an awful fix. Here’s the Rev. Mr. Maude come to spy out the nakedness of the land. If Mr. Cathers won’t help me, I am disgraced for ever. Just run round to the meeting-house and tell Mr. Cathers *if he’ll lend me his congregation* I’ll be eternally obliged to him.’

“ Like an arrow from the bow sped Mr. Jeckey on his errand. The Presbyterian service had been begun before he reached the meeting-house; indeed, it

had proceeded so far that Mr. Cathers had finished his extempore prayer and given out the psalm, which we were all singing as well as we knew how.

“But never recked Mr. Jeckey of that. Down the aisle he tramped unheeding, not a man stirring to stop his progress. Up the pulpit steps he strode, and whispered the position in Mr. Cathers’ ear.

“We were all dying of curiosity, but still we sang on—sang our fiercest, till Mr. Cathers, having taken the sense of Mr. Jeckey’s communication into his brain, raised one hand, in order to silence our voices and obtain attention for himself,

“‘My friends,’ he said, ‘our worthy Rector is in a serious strait. You all know, or have heard, of the English clergyman who is disturbing the peace of Ballinascrew. Without message or

notice of any kind he has come this morning to take the church duty here, and, as a personal favour, our Rector asks you all to go and listen to his sermon. If you will do so, I shall feel obliged. In any case, there will be no service here, as I mean to go and sit under him for this once myself.'

"So," proceeded Mr. Wright, "we all rose in a body and repaired to church, the minister heading us; and Mr. Maude looked upon such a congregation as had never gladdened his eyes in his own parish. The pews were packed, the aisles were full, the clerk could not beg, borrow, or steal prayer-books sufficient for one in six; but the dissenters did their best. They watched what the others did, and knelt at the right places, and got up not often at the wrong. If they sat during the singing when they

should have stood, that was nothing unusual even among Church people; and I am bound to say they listened to Mr. Maude consigning the Roman Catholics to the lowest depths and describing the iniquities of the Scarlet Lady with an appreciative ear.

“When Mr. Maude took off his gown, he did it with the air of a man who feels he looks like a dog with his tail between his legs.

“‘I had no idea you had such a congregation,’ he said to our Rector.

“‘It was larger than usual to-day,’ said the Rector modestly. ‘I suppose the news of your coming had got wind.’

“And something else got wind too,” finished Mr. Wright. “It was too good a story to be kept quiet, telling as it did as much against the Englishman as our Rector.

“Besides, our Rector felt it ought not to be lost. He gave a supper on the strength of it to all the parish, and was better liked than ever afterwards.

“Moreover, he told the story at various dinner-parties, and the laugh was so loud and so long against Maude that he exchanged his living with a man who has since gone over bodily to Rome, and been succeeded by a vicar of moderate views, who is the happy father of nine daughters.

“No straw bonnets or cotton frocks are given away in the parish now, I believe, and the pigs live in the cottagers’ houses, and the children in the gutters outside the houses without let or hindrance from the wife of any one, lay or clerical.”

CHAPTER V.

COLONEL LESCHELLES IS ASTONISHED.

WITH stories, quotations, and oftentimes more serious conversation on subjects of which even worldly men must occasionally take thought, Mr. Wright beguiled his visitor until the morning came round when all that remained of the Squire was to be laid in the ground.

To the brilliant sunshine which had made such brightness on Christmas Day, even in the Essex Marshes, there succeeded a dull leaden sky, giving promise of more snow, and more after that.

In due time the promise was fulfilled.

The heavens were opened, and snow fell for two days and nights without cessation.

“God bless me!” said the Curate, looking out at the untrodden road and the churchyard, where the graves were buried under a mysterious pall of white, soft flakes, “I don’t know—I don’t, indeed, know how we are going to bury that poor fellow at all.”

And, indeed, had his relations not been hungering and thirsting to know the contents of his will, in all probability the body of Squire Olier might have lain quietly enough in his own room at the Grange till the weather moderated; but as matters stood each man and each woman interested in the testamentary disposition of his property felt it was unseemly for him to keep the rightful owner out of possession beyond eight

days. Accordingly, at the end of that time, the late Squire's remains were carried to the churchyard, where by dint of bribes, and by liberal allowances of strong liquors, a grave had been prepared; and, while the mourners stood ankle deep in snow, which had already drifted again over the ground cleared for them to occupy—while the sleet soaked through Mr. Wright's surplice, and wetted the leaves of the open prayer-book—while the wind moaned over the mournful expanse of lands stretching away to the river and the German Ocean, and the hair of those gathered round the place where their dear brother departed was to be wrapped up till eternity, was dripping as if they had one and all just emerged from a bath, the Curate read the funeral service over all that was left of Squire Olier.

A few minutes, and the words, few and solemn, had been spoken, dust was gone down into the dust, ashes were returned to ashes. Ere long, one dark mound could be distinguished in the churchyard, looking like a rent in a white mantle worn over a black dress; but soon the falling snow covered that away from sight also. From a window in the vicarage, Mr. Wright noticed the flakes falling thick and soft on the Squire's grave.

“Poor fellow!” he thought, “his was a lonely life, and he is even more lonely in death than men are usually. By this time those harpies know how the property is left.”

Which was correct. By that time the harpies, who had stopped for a few minutes at the vicarage, on their return from the funeral, to swallow some brandy, were in the wainscoted parlour, where

Mr. Wright had received Colonel Leschelles, listening to the last codicil in the late Squire's will. In it was left, in token of kindness and good-will, a hundred guineas to Louis Leschelles, his cousin. As for the bulk of the estate, it was willed to a certain Charles Olier, hateful, for many reasons, to most of his kinsfolk. Being in Norway at the time of Squire Olier's death, he did not chance to be present. So those to whom no legacies were left, and their number seemed legion, were forced to vent their anger on the only person within their reach, Colonel Leschelles.

“What right had he to a hundred guineas, or a hundred pence?” they asked each other, and eventually asked him.

“I must decline to answer that question,” said the Colonel stiffly, who,

having heard from Mr. Wright that Squire Olier's estate might have been his almost for the picking up, felt, perhaps, a little natural disappointment at having been, if remembered at all, remembered to so little purpose; and then, after bowing to the assembled company, he left the room, and made his way back to the vicarage, where he had consented to remain for another night.

“Well?” said the Curate interrogatively, as he opened the door to welcome his visitor.

“Charles Olier has the property. There are the usual legacies. Several worthy people seem mightily disappointed, and I am a richer man by a hundred guineas than I was a fortnight ago.”

“Charles Olier!” exclaimed Mr. Wright. “Why, he has the name of being a second Elwes. They say he

would skin a —— Ahem!" finished the Curate, who had for the moment allowed excitement to triumph over rigid decorum.

"And sell the hide," finished the Colonel. "Yes; what is said is quite true, I am afraid."

"You might have had the place," went on the Curate, "if ——"

"If 'ifs and ands,' you remember," quoted Colonel Leschelles, with a smile. "Yes; I suppose I might if an 'if' and an 'and' had both been different. As matters stand, however, it is a matter of no consequence to me. That which we have never expected it can be no disappointment not to receive, and, I am thankful to say, I have enough, and more than enough, to satisfy all my wants."

That night the Curate, feeling,

probably, the fact of Squire Olier being buried, and his will read, had removed a weight from his mind, proved himself a more agreeable companion than ever ; in fact, so agreeable did he continue to make Colonel Leschelles think him that the gallant officer voluntarily promised to spend Christmas with Mr. Wright, in whatever part of the three kingdoms that gentleman might be, so long as the Colonel remained in England.

“ And I only wish I had a fat rectory in my gift,” added the officer, “ you should have it without the asking.”

Whereupon Mr. Wright, with a sly twinkle in his eyes, quoted the last line of the epigram which commences—

“ A vicar long ill who treasured up wealth,
Bade his curate each Sunday to pray for his
health,”

and ends with the curate's reply to a

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somewhat impertinent inquirer into the state of his own feelings—

“I’ve ne’er prayed for his Death, though I have for his Living.”

Within a few weeks after Colonel Leschelles’ departure there arrived at the vicarage a note from Mr. Wright’s late visitor, accompanied by a gold watch and chain, of which the Curate’s acceptance was requested in a few kindly and well-chosen words.

It is needless to say the Curate accepted the gift in a note containing many words.

“A most appropriate present,” thought Mr. Wright, laying aside the turnip-shaped, white-faced silver repeater, inherited from his father, he had hitherto been fain to wear; and indeed so it proved.

“The watch and chain were always,” so the Curate often remarked to Mrs. Wright, “as good as twenty pounds to

them;" and before many years had elapsed twenty pounds had been so often raised upon the articles that one facetious jeweller remarked to his foreman he thought "they might be trusted to come to his shop alone."

If Mr. Wright had ever calculated the price he paid for that money, he would have found it considerably exceeded the probable first cost of the trinkets.

In whatever straits the family found themselves about Christmas time—and their straits then were occasionally very grievous—money was generally procured to rescue Mr. Wright's watch from the accommodating Israelite who held it in charge for so large a portion of each year; or if that were impossible, he at least liberated his chain from the enemy's hands, and attached to it the old-fashioned repeater, which, not being

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worth a sixpence, was always at home and available when its more valuable relative was detained abroad on particular business.

Of course on such occasions, Colonel Leschelles knew well enough the second calling of the watchmaker who was "regulating" his present, but, being a man of the world, he took the Wrights as he found them, and acknowledged to his own heart that many persons with whom he was acquainted, and who took care of their jewellery for themselves, were not one half so pleasant, or so hospitable, or so lively as the impecunious clergyman and his wife.

Long before Mr. Wright became Rector of Fisherton, Colonel Leschelles had been made free of the state of his affairs. At a very early period of their acquaintance, Mr. Wright had requested his good friend

—“whom I hope eventually to call my old friend,” added that accomplished letter-writer in a parenthesis—“to lend him an amount which, though it would no doubt seem ridiculously small to one blessed with such abundance,” meant temporal salvation to the Curate, his dear Selina, his children, including a recently-arrived baby, and every creature connected with the establishment. “In a sentence,” said Mr. Wright, after having devoted many sentences to the explanation, “I am goaded almost to madness by the want—remember little things are great to little people—of twenty-five pounds. I know, my dear Colonel, you are just the man to help a friend at such a pinch, and will not despise him for this frank confession. I inclose my I O U for the amount, which I shall repay, D.V., in three months, with thanks and interest at five per cent. per

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annum, and shall feel eternally obliged if you will send me your cheque, open if possible, by return of post."

To which the Colonel diplomatically replied, that as he had few good friends, and could not afford to lose the regard of any one of those few, on principle he always refused to *lend* money.

"If a man," he explained, "lent money, it could only be in the expectation of having it repaid at some not remote period, when it might be most unpleasant to the borrower to have the subject mentioned. At the same time," he added, "I am always most anxious to help a friend if it lies in my power to do so, and therefore, with much regret that I am unable to send the whole amount you name, I inclose my cheque for ten pounds, which I beg you will consider as in every respect your own, and deal with accordingly."

"He is no fool, Selina," was Mr. Wright's comment on this epistle. "He knows no gentleman can ask another to *give* him money, and that after such a letter I can never trouble him again."

"But you are surely not going to return the cheque?" cried out Mrs. Wright in alarm.

"No, my dear, I am going to keep it as a *personal favour* to him. From *any other* man I could not, of course, accept ten pounds as a gift. Why, he is a comparative stranger!"

"Almost a total stranger," agreed Mrs. Wright; and then the humour of the thing struck her, and being slightly hysterical, she laughed long and heartily at Dion's way of "putting things."

When Mr. Wright took possession of the living of Fisherton, Colonel Leschelles was older than had been the case

when he first met the clergyman in Essex Marshes. If he did not note the fact, the Reverend Dionysius and his better half were more astute.

Already they were thinking about his will and the legacy he might leave to them or one of the dear children; and once when Mr. Wright was carving the Christmas turkey he caught himself considering how much the Colonel had aged, and wondering how he would cut up, and who were likely to get the best slices.

“God forgive me!” thought poor Mr. Wright, thumping himself on the chest; “I am no better than those Olier vultures who, smelling the carcass afar off, gathered hoping to have share of the spoil.” From which it will be seen that the Rector had moments of self-accusation and repentance, and that, although he generally went about the world thanking

the Lord hé and Selina were not as other men and women, it sometimes did occur to him that they were not a whit better than the publicans and sinners who contributed to their need.

On the Christmas Eve following Miss Miles' arrival at Fisherton, the Rector was, however, for once able to meet his visitor with a cheerful face which masked no ugly thoughts of legacies or creditors.

Everything in this life is comparative, and for the Rector to have no writs or summonses pressing immediately for attention meant probably as much ease of mind as it does to a millionaire to have secured a picture at his own price, or to have outbidden a rival in the matter of some precious edition.

Colonel Leschelles arrived about five o'clock, and it was as good as a puppet-show to see the Rector's greeting.

He did not say a word in the first fulness of rejoicing. With his head turned a little on one side, he clasped the Colonel's hand with a pressure which implied, "I am too glad to see you to be able to tell you how happy I feel to have you here once more;" and, indeed, his manner did convey all this, and more.

"God bless you!" he murmured at length. "Welcome again to Fisherton. Come in, come in. Don't stay out in the cold. Let me settle with the man. There, now we have got you to ourselves again. Selina! Where's Selina? My dear, the Colonel has come."

Considering that Selina had been expecting his arrival for half an hour previously, the visitor's appearance could scarcely have proved a surprise to Mrs. Wright; but, coming out of the drawing-room, arrayed, in honour of the Colonel,

in a silk dress, made with a low bodice and short sleeves, a scarf over her shoulders, bracelets of no particular material, or beauty, or worth, on her arms, her back hair wreathed round a comb in a variety of singular and charming devices, and the eternal curls falling in a graceful, not to say pathetic, manner on each side of her face, Mrs. Wright really acted a pleasant little by-play of surprise admirably.

With a heightened colour, and a smile which was sweet as well as plaintive, and a light of greeting in her eyes, which no affectation could have kindled, she took his hand in both of hers, and, saying in her pretty Irish accent—that accent which sounds so sweet falling from the lips of a gentlewoman when she does not give one too much of it—"I am very glad to see you, indeed," lifted her eyes

for a moment to the Colonel's face, then modestly withdrew them from a contemplation of his features ; but that moment told her a tale.

“ My dear,” she said to the Rev. Dion, while Colonel Leschelles, making his toilet in the apartment vacated by Miss Miles, was thinking that with his figure, by Jove, he might pass for not more than forty or forty-five when the weather was mild and he was not pulled up with that confounded rheumatism, “ My dear, he gets awfully old. I think he must have added at least twenty years to his age since I saw him last.”

“ Pooh ! ” was the Rector's answer. “ You only think so because you have been latterly looking continually upon young faces. The Colonel can't put back the clock, even with the help of tight frock-coats and leaden combs ; but

it is not running on with him, and so much the better. Good people are scarce, and we cannot afford to part with one of them—before his appointed time," added the Rector, with that sudden recollection of his vocation which was sometimes so absurd, and yet always so genuine.

Excepting upon Christmas and New Year Days, which were, of course, regarded by the young people at Fisherton as occasions when they had an immemorial right to make the lives of visitors a weariness to them, Mr. and Mrs. Wright did not cluster their olive branches round the family mahogany at the same hour when Colonel Leschelles solemnly partook of dinner.

In truth, he would not have come to them if they had to his dulled senses introduced the prattle of children, and expected him to listen to it.

The Colonel did not love any children. Elderly gentlemen, fond of their own personal comfort, mental or physical, rarely are; and he certainly had in his creed no saving clause which exempted the juvenile Wrights from a place in his bad books.

As has before been hinted, these young people were not charming, save in the estimation of their parents; and Colonel Leschelles was not their parent of either sex, for which deliverance the misguided man thanked God.

If the truth must be told, as it ought always to be in fiction, Mr. Wright was secretly pleased by the consequences of his friend's idiosyncrasy.

Mr. Wright loved his children, but he also loved his dinner; and after a man has carved for a dozen, his own share of the repast is not usually eaten with much relish.

He was too wise a husband, however,

to hint anything of this feeling to Selina, but it is a fact that the triangular meal eaten in company with Colonel Leschelles and Mrs. Wright, was very grateful to the Rector. More especially as the Colonel, under pretence of having been ordered to drink the produce of some especial vineyards, provided his own wine—and more of it than he could have consumed himself had he stayed at Fisherton for three months.

Mr. Wright candidly confessed that he did like a glass of sound port, or a sip of thoroughly good dry sherry, but beyond these things he far preferred the Colonel's Madeira, which was stated, heaven knows with what truth, to have been twice round the Cape.

The Madeira itself never spoke of its travels—on the principle, perhaps, that “good wine needs no bush.”

Further, in the pop of a champagne cork there was something which brought out all the hidden virtues of Mr. Wright's nature.

The way in which he spoke of his dear friend, when the first glass had been swallowed and approved, might have converted a misanthrope; whilst the way in which he seconded the Colonel's hint that Mrs. Wright had no wine, and pressed a second bumper on Selina, with a little nod of the head, and a cunning, "Now, now, my love; drink it up; it will do you good," was simply indescribable.

"What!" he would exclaim, "get into your head? Nonsense! I'll be bound your head is far too wise a one to let it do anything of the kind. You are tired out; that is what you are, and you want something to put new life into you.

Come, don't put a slight upon our good friend's magnificent wine. You won't get anything like this in a hurry again—take my word for that, and I taste a good deal of what is called first-quality champagne when I am asked to dine at great men's tables."

Apparently shocked by this barefaced flattery, Mrs. Wright would say, "Hush, Dion; Colonel Leschelles is not accustomed to your Irish frankness." To which Mr. Wright would reply—

"Ah, my dear, you'll never make an Englishman of me. I must say out my mind; and I don't think it much matters what I say before our kind friend here. He has known me too long not to understand me thoroughly."

And indeed this was quite true. The Colonel did understand Mr. Wright thoroughly, and could have said pretty

accurately what the Rector's pretty speeches were worth.

Nevertheless, he liked to stay with the Wrights. He liked being looked up to, and he liked being flattered. There are many people who, without being aware of the fact, are of one mind with Colonel Leschelles on these matters.

"Don't you think, Dion," said Mrs. Wright to her husband, a few days before that Christmas Eve of which this story is now treating, "that Maria might as well dine with us while the Colonel is here? She is getting old enough to appear in company, and she would balance the table nicely."

"I am afraid we mustn't risk it," answered the Rector. "In the first place, Colonel Leschelles might not like the change; in the next, we should be sowing seeds of disunion between Maria and

her sister; and, in the third place, you can't have Maria without having Bella Miles, and five would be no number at all."

"I could explain the matter to Bella," remarked Mrs. Wright.

"I don't think you could," was the reply. "If we are to have a fourth person at dinner, that fourth should be Mr. Irwin's niece."

Whereupon Mrs. Wright took refuge in her usual remark—"I suppose you know best, dear!"

"I am sure I do in this instance," said the Rev. Dion valiantly.

There were times when he openly took precedence of his wife's intellect, and shook hands with himself without disguise in her presence. But he did not thus thwart Mrs. Wright very frequently. As a rule he deferred to Selina's superior

judgment, and then took his own way, privately if possible, apologetically if necessary.

So it was settled that Maria should not dine with her elders ; and the Colonel had therefore his repast in peace and quietness.

After dinner—that is to say, after the soup and the fish and all the other courses had come and gone—after dessert had been trifled with, and all the wines tried with judicial slowness and calmness—after coffee had been served, and the Colonel had declared he never tasted such coffee out of France as that to be met with at Fisherton—Mr. Wright said—

“Should you like to step up and see the decorations in our church? The ladies are just putting the finishing touches to them. We shall show something out of the common to-morrow, I can assure you.”

“My dear Wright,” answered the

Colonel, "I have no doubt the decorations will be everything they ought to be in your church; but I would not leave your hospitable fireside to-night for all the wreaths, and crosses, and mottoes, and holly and laurel in Christendom."

"Just as you like," cheerfully agreed the Rector. "But I must go my rounds. I must inspect my fair regiment. Each profession has its toils as well as its pleasures."

"I know who would have commanded, had my regiment been composed of ladies," remarked Colonel Leschelles. "But don't delay duty on my account. I will have a chat with Mrs. Wright in your absence. I always like talking to Mrs. Wright."

"And Mrs. Wright always likes talking to you," said the Rector, with his accustomed heartiness. "She is out of the

way of congenial society here. As she says, from one month's end to another, not a soul calls with whom she can exchange an idea."

With which compliment to the grasp of the Colonel's intellect, implied and understood, Mr. Wright went off to church, leaving his wife *tête-à-tête* with their visitor.

"Dion!" called Mrs. Wright after him, "mind you bring the girls back with you. Maria has got a cold already, and we must not have any invalids in the house at Christmas time."

"Well, my dear, that can only be as Heaven pleases," answered the Rector; "but I will bring them back with me, never fear."

That, however, was precisely the thing he failed to do. Accompanied by his daughters, he returned in about an hour

to the rectory, when he informed Mrs. Wright that Bella's uncle had called at the church and gone with her for a stroll by moonlight.

"I wonder if he will come here for supper," said Selina, care on her brow and housewifely anxiety in her heart.

"I should not think so," replied the Rector. "He will want to catch the nine o'clock train if he means to get back to town to-night; but, in any case, we can but give him the best we have in our larder. You may be quite sure Irwin is not the man to suspect us of want of hospitality."

"He must be a very extraordinary man if he could do anything of the sort," remarked Colonel Leschelles.

In return for which observation, Mrs. Wright cast upon him a grateful glance, and said softly, "Thank you."

Time passed on, but Miss Bella did not return. Nine o'clock came—a quarter past—half past—and still no Bella.

“I wonder where the girl can be!” marvelled Mr. Wright. “Her uncle would never take her to London without letting us know.”

“Perhaps he is staying somewhere in the neighbourhood,” suggested Mrs. Wright.

“I think I will go up as far as the station,” said the Rector. “The Colonel won't miss me while he is showing you the presents he has brought for the children.”

“Really, it is too bad of Mr. Irwin,” said Mrs. Wright, who had never forgiven that gentleman for not rising to the bait of refurnishing Bella's bedroom. “He ought to know better than keep the girl out until this time of night.”

“ We are all of us old enough to know better, Selina,” answered the Rector, taking his arm which he had just put into the sleeve of his top coat out of it again; “ and, after all, I don’t see that there can be any use in my going to the station. He must, as you say, be staying in the neighbourhood somewhere. He would never leave her to walk home alone.”

“ I should be very sorry to answer for what Mr. Irwin might or might not do,” commented Mrs. Wright, seated before the drawing-room fire, and screening her face from the blaze with a great feather fan brought by an admiring *protégé* from foreign parts.

“ I think I will go, too,” remarked the Rector in the hall, putting on his top-coat again.

“ Ha ! here they are at last,” he added

delightedly, as a pattering on the gravel announced that some one was coming up the drive.

“Why, Bella, my dear,” he went on, flinging open the door and looking out incredulously into the night, “where is your uncle? Is he not with you? Have you come home alone?”

“Oh, Mr. Wright, I hope you will not be displeased,” she began; “but we walked farther than we intended, and he had only just time to catch the last train. He wanted to come home with me, but I did not know where he could stay for the night, and besides, he wished to go to London; so I told him I would run all the way home, but I did not; I came back slowly, and that is the reason why I am so late.”

“Gracious heavens, child! what is the matter?—what has happened?” asked

Mr. Wright, noticing she could scarcely restrain her tears, and that her face looked white and troubled. Dreadful visions of Mr. Irwin's bankruptcy, insolvency, and ruin were vouchsafed to the Rector as he led her into the drawing-room and closed the door. In imagination he read, "A large failure is announced to-day in the City, that of Irwin and Son, die-sinkers, Eastcheap," and dire fears assailed him of the stoppage of that bank, so lately discovered from which he had hoped cheques would continue to flow as naturally as manna once fell from heaven.

For a minute Miss Miles, coming out of the faint moonlight into the drawing-room, which the dancing fire and many wax candles made brilliant, seemed too much blinded and frightened to speak. Then, recovering composure, and seeing

two pairs of anxious eyes fixed on her, she said :

“There is nothing the matter—at least there is, for old Mr. Irwin died yesterday. But it is not that,” she added, “it was not that which made me foolish. Uncle and I were talking about long ago, and I could not help crying as I came home. And oh! may I go to bed, please?” she went on, addressing Mrs. Wright; “I have a dreadful headache, and I do not want to see anybody.”

“Certainly, dear, go at once,” replied Mrs. Wright, kissing the girl with a sudden impulse of affection and pity, which caress Bella returned with interest.

“Good-night,” she said, turning to Mr. Wright, who stood by, relieved but astonished.

He opened the door for her to pass out, and laying his hand on her shoulder, answered her words by saying—

“ Bless you, my child ! ”

Then he went back to Selina, and exclaimed twice with great solemnity—

“ Poor old Mr. Irwin ! dear—dear—dear ! ”

Meantime Miss Miles, stealing off to Mr. Wright's dressing-room, which had for the nonce been appropriated to her use, was encountered suddenly by Colonel Leschelles coming, laden with gifts, out of the blue-and-white apartment her skilful fingers had helped to embellish.

For a moment the light of the candle he carried fell full on her face, while he, standing still, made way for her to pass.

With a little timid half-curtsey and a “ Good-night, sir, ” spoken, in the confusion of the moment, in French, she tripped nervously away along the passage, leaving the Colonel still standing looking after her in amazement, his candle held

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aloft, and his astonishment finding vent
in a muttered exclamation—

“I have seen that girl before,” he
thought; “but where?”

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT MR. IRWIN CAME TO TELL.

WHEN, earlier on that same Christmas Eve, Mr. Irwin looked into Fisherton Church to ascertain if his niece were there, a very pretty sight met his eyes.

Gas had not then penetrated farther into Fisherton than the railway station, distant some mile and a half, and it was by the light of many candles that the ladies, young and old, who had undertaken the care of the decorations, were fastening up mottoes, twining wreaths round pillars, affixing lettered banners to the walls—

were, in a word, engaged in putting the old building into gala attire.

There is a certain picturesqueness about candlelight, which gas emulates in vain. The long, deep shadows—the small spaces cleared out of utter darkness—the corners filled with blackness—the changing of figures from flesh and blood to unreal phantoms as they pass into the shade—the roof seen indistinctly, and looking consequently twice as lofty as it is in reality—the uncertainty as to what is hidden behind the pillars, and a sense of wonderment concerning the chancel, looking so dim and far away in the gathering gloom—all these things go to make up an interior, the secrets and fancies composing which gas sweeps ruthlessly away.

I marvel now what has become of the imaginings which childhood—in the days

when Fisherton Church had to trust to the candle-maker for evening illumination —was wont to conjure up out of the old tomb to the right of the chancel, on which, under a stone canopy, lay the figure of a knight clad in complete armour, or of that other monument surrounded by praying children, and surmounted by a score of fat-cheeked cherubs bearing the body of Dame Ursula Berton, resting on rocky clouds, straight away to heaven.

When, last Christmastide, the present generation of young ladies assembled to put the finishing strokes to their labours, I am afraid the old church, though doing much credit to their taste and skill, lost, by reason of flaring gaslights, most of its romance.

Youth, beauty, and grace are eternal, and yet as the fashion of the settings in which we behold them vary, so may those

who have had their taste moulded in days gone down many and many a year ago into the grave of time, be pardoned if the conceits of a former age seem to them more lovely than the bald framing of this.

To the end of his life Mr. Irwin, at all events, will never forget Fisherton Church as he looked into it for the first and the last time by night ; never forget the sweet scent of the flowers, and the faint, unfamiliar, almost sickening odour of the evergreens, the flitting figures of the young girls now tripping away into darkness, now posing themselves unconsciously into some picturesque attitude ; whilst all the time the gloom of the pointed arches refused to receive even a gleam of light, and the ancient pillars seemed to submit themselves unwillingly to the hands of the beautifiers.

Around the font, admiring the work of

her deft white fingers, stood a group of matrons and elderly ladies, who were expressing in no measured terms their admiration of Miss Miles' taste and skill.

“Not a flower or leaf but Christmas roses in the whole thing, I declare!” one voluble mother remarked, as she reluctantly moved towards the door; “and look at it! If you had showered down stars from the firmament on a green meadow, it could not be more like life itself.”

“Do you know whether Miss Miles is engaged?” asked a gentleman standing in the shadow at this juncture, addressing the speaker, who had been uttering her admiration to no one in particular.

“Lawks, sir, how you did frighten me!” remarked the worthy woman. “I made sure it was a ghost a-speaking. Miss Miles, sir, she have just a-finished

that there font, and though I say it, as perhaps shouldn't, being Fisherton bred and born, I don't think to-morrow will see such another font in all England. Did you want Miss Miles, sir?"

"Yes; if you could say to her, without putting yourself to inconvenience, that her uncle is here, I should feel very much obliged."

A moment after his niece sprang forward to where he stood.

"I am so glad—so glad to see you, uncle! I did not think you would be down before the end of the week. Come and look at my work. I did it all, every bit, myself."

"I have seen it," he answered. "I have been looking at it and you for the last quarter of an hour."

"And never spoke a word to me," she pouted.

“There were plenty to speak and say pleasant things besides me, my dear,” he said gravely and fondly; “and I liked to listen to your praises. It makes me so happy to think I acted wisely in bringing you here.”

“I am sure you did,” she agreed. “I have learnt a great deal at Fisherton—more, in some ways, than I could have done in twenty years at school. You are going to the rectory, of course?”

“No,” was the reply. “I want to have a chat with you. It is a moonlight night, if not a very bright one—not like the moonlights we remember elsewhere. Let us have a walk.”

“I will just tell the girls where I am gone, in case Mr. Wright wants me, and be with you in a moment.” And through light and shade he watched her figure fitting up the aisle, and away to the

reading desk, where the Misses Wright received her communication with the most polite indifference.

Red Indians and our upper ten thousand have, it is said, one charming trait in common—that of possessing the faculty of seeming to be surprised at and interested in nothing. If this be, as we are credibly assured it is, the perfection of good breeding, clergymen's children must have close affinity to the *crème de la crème* of society and barbarism.

Personally, I have no more acquaintance with braves and their squaws than I have with dukes and duchesses; but it has been my privilege to mix pretty freely with the sons and daughters of men holding rank of some sort in the Church, and I can safely say I have seldom met one who could be prevailed

upon to evince a human interest in the affairs of any living being who was not directly or indirectly connected with themselves, or their papa's parish, or their papa's prospects.

This is, of course, while they remain in the parental nest. The world, fortunately, possesses a potent recipe for eliminating spiritual and social conceit out of the first-born even of a bishop; and there comes a time when the greatest prig nurtured in a rural parish becomes not merely tolerable, but agreeable in his manners.

But there is a middle passage to be encountered before this delectable land, where children born in rectories and vicarages become amenable to the laws of ordinary society, is reached, and clerical children may be met on equal terms by those destitute of ecclesiastical position.

The young Wrights were embarked on that passage, and woe to the unfortunate traveller who chanced to be in the vessel with them.

To all intents and purposes, they were ensconced in the cabin, while all the rest of their world had been only able to pay steerage fares. It is nice, this, for the clerical offspring, while it lasts; but it is nice also for the laity to remember it cannot last for ever. At first Miss Miles had writhed under the contemptuous indifference of Mr. Wright's dear children to anything except themselves and their own belongings; but time reconciles us to most things, and Maria's coolly-uttered "very well," in answer to her delighted communication, did not damp her spirits in the least.

"This is lovely!" she said to her uncle, clasping both hands round his

arm as they left the church. "Only think of our having such a good time all to ourselves!"

"I am afraid you will not think it so good a time, after all," he answered; "for I have something unpleasant to tell you."

Instantly the smile left her lips, and the light faded out of her eyes.

"About — about — my father?" she faltered.

"No; not about him—at least, I have news of him. He is going to the diggings."

"Does he speak of coming home?"

"No. He says he will never come home unless he can return a rich man, which is not very likely."

"I do not know that," said the girl faintly.

Then ensued silence for a few minutes, which Mr. Irwin broke by saying—

“My father-in-law is dead.”

“Dead!” she repeated. “When? What did he die of?”

“A fit of passion,” was the answer, spoken coldly, and almost sullenly. “We had a quarrel about ten days ago, and when he was in the middle of a bitter and unjust sentence he fell back insensible; and, though he lived for over a week, he never fully recovered consciousness.”

“How horrible! What a dreadful thing for you!”

“It would have been a dreadful thing for me if he had recovered consciousness,” replied Mr. Irwin. “He would have left me, comparatively speaking, a beggar. I wish, Bella—I wish with all my heart—I could say I felt sorry when I saw him lying dead. Had he lived, I must have left the firm, separated from my wife—that misfortune I could have

survived, however—parted, for the time at least, from my children, and begun the world all over again.”

“Why, what happened?—what could have happened?” she inquired, shivering, though she was warmly clad, and the night not particularly cold.

“I will tell you,” he answered; “in fact, I must tell you, for our interests are identical, and besides, it is a relief to speak out to some one. Always I have been to a certain extent in my father-in-law’s power, and occasionally he made me feel the fact. Still, on the whole, we got on pretty well together. He liked keeping the reins in his own hands, but he was liberal enough in pecuniary matters; and though he never let me forget that the money was his, still he did not grudge me an ample share of it.”

He paused for a moment, and then continued—

“Some short time since we had a dispute with one of our customers about an account. He wanted, as I considered, to evade a just claim, and I was, therefore, firm about the matter—firmer than I should otherwise have been about a larger amount.”

“Yes, uncle?” said his niece inquiringly.

“At last we threatened legal proceedings, and he then sent his attorney to our office to endeavour to effect some compromise.

“My partner left the management of the affair to me, and I rejected all offers of arrangement. After the lawyer had called two or three times his manner suddenly changed. He dared me to bring any case into court; he threatened

me; he said, with a cunning insolence, for which I could have struck him, 'Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones;' and when I asked him what he meant, he said, 'I thought there was something familiar to me about you, spite of your beard and your Yankee twang; but I was not sure of the matter until the other day, when I happened to meet a lady coming up the stairs, whom I remembered perfectly. Come, you had better give up your point. You won't like going into court, I know, and being asked if you ever stood in the dock yourself. Put pride in your pocket, Mr. Irwin, and prove yourself as discreet as you have been fortunate.'"

"And what did you do, uncle?" she asked.

"I behaved like a simpleton. I told him to do his best or his worst. I said I

was more resolved than ever to insist on our rights; and then I opened the door, and remarked that if he did not leave the office at once I would kick him out of it."

"And he?" inquired the girl.

"He laughed in my face. He said I should perhaps sing to a different tune before many days were over; and then he ran downstairs, stopping at the first landing to make a mocking bow."

"Uncle, who was the lady?" asked Miss Miles.

"Can't you guess, my child?" he said, pityingly, and then went on speaking more rapidly—"Yes; she found me out—traced me by some means. I warned her not to come to the office. I entreated her not to ruin me as she ruined her husband. I told her I would do anything—anything that lay in my power for her welfare—if she would only keep quiet, and

let me have the chance of keeping that horrid past out of sight. She promised me faithfully to keep our relationship a secret, and then, because I could not go to see her the very day she wished, came three times to the office—three times, I assure you, in as many hours.”

“She ought not to have done it; she ought to have considered you,” murmured his niece.

“She ought. I have done all I could for her; but she is just the same as ever. If she wants a thing, she thinks the world ought to stand still while she gets it. When I remonstrated with her on her imprudence, she laughed and said—‘Nobody will notice me. No one could recognize me;’ and she would not even draw down her veil.”

“Why did she want to see you so particularly?” asked the girl.

“ She wanted me to find her money to go to Australia.”

“ But you will not do so! Oh! don't let her go there !” entreated his companion.

“ I shall come to that part of my story presently,” said Mr. Irwin. “ Let me tell you what that precious lawyer did. He went to my father-in-law, and raked up all the old tale; told how I had been connected with your father; told how he was transported, and how I had been taken into custody; explained how my sister had been acquitted, though no living being could doubt her complicity; said I had been obliged to leave the country, that I was no better than a thief, and that I was still the companion of thieves, with much more to the same effect. He, a clerk at that time, had, it appears, been engaged in the case, and knew all about it.

“That same evening, when all the clerks but one had gone—thank God he did not go—Mr. Irwin came up to my private office and opened fire.

“First of all, he asked me if what he had heard was true. Had my brother-in-law been a common workman—had he been taken up for theft—had he been convicted—had my sister been charged with him—had I myself been suspected of being an accomplice. To these questions I had to answer ‘Yes.’ I tried to explain, to soften, to make the best of a bad business—all in vain. I could not alter facts; and he broke out.

“He said I had come to him in a false character—under false pretences—that I had basely betrayed the confidence he reposed in me, and repaid his kindness by inveigling his daughter into forming an attachment for a mere adventurer—a

common swindler. I thought he would exhaust his vehemence at last, so I finally sat silent. This he mistook for defiance. 'You think, I suppose,' he said, 'that I cannot sever my connection with you. If there is justice in England, I will have it. You shall not say I sent you off penniless, but you shall not have a halfpenny more than I choose to give. You may smile' (I had done nothing of the sort), 'but I shall prove as good as my word. I shall make my will to-night, and tie up every farthing, so that you can never riot on my hard-earned money. I shall take steps for a separation between you and my daughter. I shall——'

“‘You need not trouble yourself to explain your intentions further,’ I broke in at this juncture. ‘I shall never make any demand upon you in the future. I shall never see you or your daughter

again.' And with that I was about to leave the office, when he broke into the most frightful paroxysm of rage imaginable.

" 'Don't go!' he shouted. 'Don't dare to go! I have not half done with you. I have not said a quarter I mean to say. I will send the police after you if you——'

"I shall never know what he imagined I was going to do," finished Mr. Irwin in a broken and agitated voice, "for at that moment he made a movement, as if trying to clutch the air, and fell back in a fit.

"I ran to him, and unfastened his cravat. I shouted for Tucker to come and stay with him while I went for a doctor. I raced through the streets like a madman, and at last procured medical assistance in the person of a young surgeon.

“When he looked at him he shook his head. ‘You had better not try to move him, sir,’ he said. ‘Make up a bed here and give him a chance. I should like to meet a doctor upon the case. There may be some hope, but my own impression is he will never speak again.’

“We did all we could for him. The doctor came—many doctors came, but all confirmed the surgeon’s opinion. Everything money could buy was bought. Everything skill could suggest was tried. His daughter came, but fainted directly, and had to be sent away again. We had two nurses, and I myself seldom left him. On the eighth day he died.

“He never spoke another conscious word. He never made the threatened will. He died intestate, as I understand from his solicitors; and if that be the case, nothing can now effect my pecu-

niary position; but I am afraid I shall not be able to hold up my head in the City again.

“I met that horrid lawyer to-day, and he said, with a grin, ‘It is better to be born lucky than rich; is it not, Mr. Walter Chappell Irwin? It is fortunate when refractory relations die just in the nick of time.’”

“Oh! uncle, uncle!” cried out Bella Miles, “don’t offend that man any more. Make terms with him. Do anything to make him keep quiet!”

CHAPTER VII.

UNCLE AND NIECE.

“I AM afraid it is impossible to make terms with the fellow without buying him,” said Mr. Irwin, in answer to his niece’s entreaty; “and there is nothing of which I have such a dread as putting myself into the power of any human being.”

“But if you are in his power already?” she suggested.

“I should be putting myself more in his power if I began paying him for silence.”

“In what way?”

“Why, his demands would go on

increasing till the burden became unendurable—besides, there may be fifty other people who recollect me perfectly.”

“I thought you said he would not have recognized you, had it not been for the unfortunate meeting with—my mother.”

“He had some remembrance of me before that. Oh, Bella! what would I not give to be able to begin my life over again with my present experience! I think the happiest man on earth must be he who, having no past he is afraid to remember, can walk in the present, and on to face the future without dread.”

She did not answer. She was thinking how frequently the same idea had occurred to her: how enviable, spite of its cares, its shifts, its debts and its humiliations, Mr. Wright's lot had often seemed when contrasted with her own.

A life which held nothing in it to be

concealed was her notion of an existence to be envied.

We have each and all our ideal of perfect happiness. Mr. Wright's was to have always five pounds in his pocket, and no duns at his gates. Miss Miles', to be able to speak freely without fear, and to feel she could answer any question concerning her parents and her childhood without falsehood.

To some of the old Barthornes—to some of the loyal gentlemen, and fair, faithful daughters of Abbotsleigh—this girl had gone back for the qualities which made her shrink when she was forced to back up the fiction of her orphan condition with one untruth after another.

There had been a time when she thought her uncle would have done wisely to tell the Rev. Mr. Wright and Selina his wife the story of her life as it really

was ; but she thought so no longer. Life at Fisherton, which had taught her much, had proved to her that there are some things concerning which silence is wisdom—silence is a necessity. Even as a servant, she now understood the terrible past would, if revealed, have power to destroy every blossom of happiness existence held.

She had no choice except to be careful and secret ; but every vein in her heart loathed the deception she was forced to practise. Never till the end came, when deception was no longer needful, did her lips utter glibly the falsehoods her position compelled them to frame. Neither did she seek to justify her own lack of verity by dwelling on the shortcomings of others.

Not a day passed at Fisherton without some polite fiction being uttered by

gracious, plausible Mrs. Wright—who was wont to say there was only one sin she humanly considered unpardonable, and that was lying; whilst as for poor Mr. Wright, the fibs he told, the “false glosses” he put on, the mendacious statements he backed almost with tears—would have been absurd, had they not been pitiable also.

And yet, in this atmosphere, Bella kept her faith intact in all things good, true, and lovely. Perhaps, by reason of her own fault she dared not judge the faults of others. This virtue is not a common one. It is so much easier to see the mote than to feel the beam, that we may well excuse poor Mrs. Wright for frequently expressing her sorrow at finding people “so false.”

But as for Bella, never once in Fisher-ton church, when Mr. Wright was declar-

ing the weightier matters of the law, did this girl—in whom I hope some of my readers feel an interest—mentally thrust his words back to his condemnation. Nay, rather, when she fell on her knees and shut out the congregation, and thought of all the sermon had taught her, her cry to God was, “Have mercy on me, a sinner,” rather than “I thank Thee that I am not as these.”

“Uncle,” she began at last, “do you remember promising long ago that you would some day tell me about the work you used to do at West Green?”

“I hoped you had forgotten all that,” he said.

“I never forget. I wish—I wish I could,” she answered. “I should be so happy if it were possible to fancy those times only a bad dream.”

“We will not recall them,” he replied.

“But there are some things I want to understand,” she persisted. “I lie awake at night, and try to patch and put together all I can recollect of what happened when I was a child. I have often had the question on my lips before, but did not like to put it; now, however, that we have got upon the subject, I must ask you just one thing, uncle: what was the work, so still and quiet, that kept you up hours after all our neighbours were in bed?”

“It was coining,” he said doggedly. “Don’t look so frightened—we did not send out bad money, but good; and had your father contented himself with doing what he told me he intended to do—buy old silver and gold cheap—I don’t know that much harm could have come of the matter; but he did not content himself with that, as you are aware. Your

mother's folly and his own obstinacy ruined him.

“ Often and often I told him what the end of it must be ; but he always laughed at my cautions, and said he would give any one leave to find him out who could. I do not see, however, that any good purpose can be served by our discussing that terrible past. Ever since the night you and I walked together into London, I have tried, God knows, to lead an honest life. I have striven to make atonement where atonement was possible. Every penny of the money which fell to my share, and that was in my possession when the crash came, I have divided amongst those I had any reason to suppose suffered through our malpractices. First or last, I have never used any of your father's share in order to pay for your education ; and latterly I have not

touched it even to provide for your mother. As for your father, Bella, he has paid a heavy penalty for his sins, and I think we may let them rest. What I hope and trust and pray now is, that he may not return to England—that neither of us may ever set eyes on him again. The best news I could hear would be that he was dead, and the story of his crime and its punishment buried with him.”

She was crying, silently and secretly, but in the moonlight he could see the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Come, dear,” he said, “let us turn back and have no more melancholy talk. You are not responsible for his faults, and we must prevent his sins being ever visited on you. The day may come when you will have to decide for yourself, whether you will cast in your lot with either of your parents—which would be

certain destruction to your happiness—or whether you will strike out in life independent of both. It is possible, now Mr. Irwin is dead, that I may eventually be able to adopt you as my own daughter, and take you to my own home. That is what I should like to do; but for the present you must remain here. You are happy at the rectory, I hope and believe?”

“Quite—oh yes!—quite,” she said, her voice a little unsteady and broken with tears.

“And you are learning the usages of society, and all that sort of thing, which may be useful to you hereafter?”

“Yes—I think so.”

“As for your mother, Bella,” he went on, “she is just what she always was. She was a foolish young woman, and she is now a foolish middle-aged woman. Her latest idea is to go out to Australia

and join your father. She says she is certain he would not refuse to be reconciled after all these years. But I think her real reason for undertaking the journey is that she believes he is married to some one else. She was always jealous when she had him under her eye, and she is naturally more jealous now he is beyond her supervision. She did not say much about you. She asked if she could see you, and offered to go to France for the purpose ; but when I reminded her of the promise your father exacted from me that I should not permit any communication, she seemed quite satisfied. At the same time, it would not surprise me if she went to every school in and about Paris to try and find you."

"But, uncle, you are surely not going to let her sail for Australia!" exclaimed the girl.

“My dear Bella, how can I prevent her going to Australia, or any other place she takes a fancy to visit? She has money from me, of course, and she can spend it in paying rent or paying for her passage, just as she pleases. The only thing I could do would be to say: ‘As you are determined to have your own way, I will make that way as unpleasant to you as possible;’ and this is precisely what I should not care to do. For a few pounds more she can travel comfortably instead of uncomfortably; and as it is not in the least degree likely she will find her husband when she gets to Australia, why, no harm will be done, and she will be out of my way for some time, at all events.”

“Why should she not find him?”
asked his niece.

“Because Australia is a big country,

and she does not happen to know where he is in it. You may be very sure I did not give her the address to which he told me to write. She has an idea that Australia is something like New York, where, if you remember, she followed me, and found me."

"But if they do meet, something dreadful will happen," said the girl. "He will never forgive her—I feel quite certain of that."

"And if I were in his place, I do not think I could forgive her either. Knowing what she must have known——" He stopped abruptly.

"Go on, please," entreated his niece. "What was it she did know? Was it what I have so often fancied—what I have been afraid even to think about?"

"Why she knew, of course—she must have known—that most of the things

which came into the house were stolen," said Mr. Irwin, a little confusedly.

"And what else?" persisted his companion.

"What else should there be? Was not that enough?"

"It is a long time ago," she said; "and, what with the voyage to America and the fever I had, I often get confused when trying to recall things that happened when I was young. But there comes back to me occasionally a terrible notion—I cannot remember when it first took firm hold of me—that I heard people talk about a dreadful murder; and with that murder I associate the dagger we dropped that night we walked across the quiet fields I have never seen since, and then through the London streets. Am I right? Was not some man killed at Highgate?"

He did not immediately answer—when he did, it was in a constrained tone.

“Yes—I think there was a man found dead about that time.”

“Was it ever known who killed him?”

“Never, I believe.”

“Uncle, do you know?”

“I do not,” he answered.

“Do you suspect? Was it my father? Did we drop the clue in that silent street off the Liverpool Road?”

There ensued a dead silence. For the first time Walter Chappell felt a sickening desire to defend his brother-in-law's character—for the first time he searched about for excuses—for the first time he felt inclined to act as his advocate.

“Uncle, you do not speak,” she said at last softly.

“My dear,” he answered, “you press me hard and sore. I cannot tell you a

lie ; and yet, if I must speak, I am only able to say—what must pierce you to the heart. I believe that night you saved your father's life. I think, had that dagger been found in his house he would not have been transported—he would have died in front of Newgate. But, Bella, remember this : he did not do the deed, if it was done by him, in cold blood. I never mentioned the subject to him—I never will, except in case of the direst necessity. But my reading of the matter is this : He had constant access to the house. For days, as I take it—perhaps for weeks—he had been removing gold and silver plate and ornaments from the strong room. On the morning when M'Callum died he had probably just removed some valuable articles, and being met with the spoil, in a moment of desperation he killed the man who had

the misfortune to encounter him. I have thought the matter over and over, and can come to no other conclusion than that he did kill M'Callum, in order to escape the precise doom which afterwards overtook him. He was in too great a hurry to be rich, Bella. I trace every ill which has befallen him to one master passion—ambition.”

And then, taking the girl's cold hand in his, he told her the story of her father's birth, education, expectations, disappointment.

With more tenderness than he had ever thought to employ when speaking of a man he feared and almost hated, he who had turned from the error of his ways recited the wrongs of this Ishmael who considered himself to have been so harshly treated.

He spoke of him as, had circumstances,

happened otherwise, he might have been—a wealthy country squire, clever, well informed, highly considered; and then he presented her with the reverse of the picture. He showed her the youth, brought up to consider himself the heir, cast out from his father's house, working as a common smith—with all the blood in his veins turning to gall—with all his boyish hopes dispelled—with all the idols he had worshipped shattered.

And so he talked on till he was almost too late for his train; and she, after running a few yards on her way to the rectory, slackened her pace to weep almost frantically, for pity, over the father she trusted she might never see more—for sorrow that she herself had not died when she lay sick of that terrible fever in New York.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROSIE'S DÉBUT.

IF Mr. Wright had gone to bed on Christmas Eve with even a vague fear as to the solvency of Mr. Irwin, junior, and any doubt concerning the profitable "cutting up" of old Mr. Irwin's estates, his direst forebodings must on Christmas morning have been entirely dissipated.

Beside the hot water lay two packets, small, sealed, suggestive—one directed to Mrs. Wright, the other to the Rev. D. Wright, both in Bella Miles' handwriting. The first contained a plain but handsome bracelet, with Mr. Irwin's kind

regards and best wishes; the second a ring, with Bella Miles' earnest hope that the Rev. Dion might spend a happy Christmas, and enjoy many happy New Years.

"Really most graceful," said the Rector, turning the ring over and over, referring, it is scarcely necessary to say, to the thoughtfulness of the donor.

"I am sure I never expected Mr. Irwin to think of me," remarked Mrs. Wright, sitting up in bed, and clasping the bracelet round her arm, which, though fair and soft, had lost much of the shapely plumpness of youth. "I call this a very handsome gift indeed."

"That it is," agreed the Rector heartily; "and the very thing you were in want of. You have needed a decent bracelet badly enough this many a year past, Selina."

Which was indeed quite true, jewellery happening not to be one of the sins of extravagance that Mrs. Wright affected.

At the first stir of wakened life in their parents' apartment came the children, eager to display their gifts, with which they were laden—gifts from aunts in Ireland, who had stinted themselves to send toys, and presents of all sorts to boys and girls already overstocked with books, and boxes, and dolls, and trumpets, and so forth.

Some indiscreet friend had forwarded Curran a drum, in which Roderick, with a wise foresight, had already punctured a few holes to facilitate the speedy demise of its powers of giving annoyance; and Rosie was making morning hideous by producing appalling sounds from the interior of a barking dog.

But Miss Miles' presents exceeded

those of all other donors in value and appropriateness.

Roderick, it is true, was slow to disclose the wonders of his dressing-case, because amongst them were a pair of razors ; but the other sons and daughters of the house of Wright eagerly displayed writing-desks, and silver pencils, and small brooches, and necklaces, and knives, and boxes full of *bonbons*, which Bella had purchased.

“Now, now, now!” exclaimed Mr. Wright at last. If he was a fond parent, he was also a fidgety man, and liked to have ample leisure for making his toilet, eating his breakfast, looking out his sermon, and walking at a moderate pace to church. “Take these things away, and be off every one of you. Do you think I can brush my hair with all you young plagues swarming about me?”

“Yes, run away, dears,” echoed the

plagues' mamma. "Curran, I hope you gave Bella a pretty kiss for her kindness to you?"

"We have all kissed her, ma," said Miss Maria, who was judging of the effect of the new bracelet on her own wrist.

"I didn't," contradicted Roderick, who perhaps felt he was too far advanced in years for such exercises to be considered becoming; "but I told her she was a jolly girl, and that I was awfully obliged to her."

"Roderick," remonstrated Mr. Wright, "where do you learn that incomprehensible style of language? Not from your mother or me, of that I am quite sure."

Now, if Mr. Wright had left out that statement, his utterance might have inspired his son with reverence. As matters were, the idea of either of his parents indulging in slang tickled.

Roderick's fancy to such a degree that he could only splutter out, "I don't suppose, sir, my language would be proper uttered in the pulpit; but it is quite comprehensible. All fellows understand 'jolly' and 'awfully.' I am sure you yourself know clearly what I mean."

"A new generation is about to reign," remarked Mr. Wright resignedly, "and you, I suppose, are one of the intended rulers."

He would have quoted Shakespeare at that moment anent young folks pushing elders from their stools: but he could not remember the text quite accurately; and, moreover, he was tying his white cravat, an operation which with him was one of exceeding care and nicety. Breakfast on Sunday morning at Fisherton Rectory was quite an imposing ceremony, and it is needless to say that on Christmas

mornings all the resources of the establishment were brought into play.

Mr. Wright himself, in a snowy shirt and unexceptionable broad-cloth, was indeed a spectacle to rejoice the heart of all good Protestants; and then there was Mrs. Wright, arrayed in her best bib and tucker; and the children, the eldest dressed out in their choicest apparel, the youngest soaped and towelled up to a state of the highest perfection, with well-oiled sleek heads, with wonderful chubby mottled-looking arms, with pinafores which rivalled the whiteness of their male parent's shirt, with little rosettes of bright-coloured ribbon tying up their sleeves, and a fillet of the same confining their hair.

It was not in Mr. Wright's human nature to refrain from casting a triumphant look at Colonel Leschelles when the

troop ranged themselves round the table, and folded their hands preparatory to the grace, which their father, having a dislike to lukewarm tea, made commendably short.

As for Mrs. Wright, she held a fixed opinion that every one must be miserable, if not clearly wicked, who had not several children, and she made no secret even to the Colonel himself that she believed he was wretched because no fruitful vine and no young olive branches graced his solitary board.

On occasions such as the present she was, therefore, wont to look at her children with a fond smile, which she suffered to fade away into sadness as her eyes rested on the unhappy bachelor.

This little pantomime amused the Colonel immensely; and it was perhaps because she was the only one of the party

likely to sympathize with his enjoyment of the position, that his glance involuntarily sought out Bella Miles, in whose face he saw something of mirth lurking.

Spite of her trouble—spite of the fact that she had cried herself to sleep overnight, and that her head was still aching, by reason of the conversation with her uncle on the previous evening, Bella could not help being diverted with both parents and children.

The latter were so satisfied with themselves, and the former were so satisfied with themselves and their offspring too, that the sight of the family trooping downstairs, followed by the admiring looks and approving words of the Rev. Dion and Mrs. Wright, was enough to have tried the gravity of any disinterested spectator.

“Ah,” said Nurse Mary, in a discreet “aside” to Miss Miles, “they say stock-

is as good as money; but if I was in master's shoes, I think I could do with less of it than he has in hand."

On that particular Christmas Day Rosie was to make her *début* in church, and on the strength of this circumstance Bella Miles had presented the child with a Prayer-book almost as big, and quite as bright and new-looking, as herself.

Already, with the assistance of Roderick, Rosie and Curran had looked up several services of the Church, publicly baptized her latest doll, married her to a man who was suspended on wires, and turned summersaults in a way calculated to make the beholder dizzy; and finally, having stretched her in an eau-de-Cologne case, buried her under the blankets of Rosie's cot. These rites and ceremonies satisfactorily performed, Curran and Rosie had a stand-up fight as to who should carry

the Prayer-book to church; and Nurse Mary finally conveyed the coveted article to Miss Miles' room, assuring her it had "stood a near chance of being torn to bits among them quarrelsome young divils. God forgive me for speaking such a word—though He knows I am not calling them out of their right names."

To describe the house when the young people were preparing and being prepared to go to church, it would, to quote Nurse Mary's lucid remark, "take the pen of a Job."

Maria had split her new gloves, and Roderick could not find the hat-brush, upon which Curran had seated himself in a sulk because his mamma would not let him have a mince-pie before starting. One child was crying and another laughing. Colonel Leschelles was walking up and down the drawing-room, uttering

a special thanksgiving all by himself. Mr. Wright, umbrella shouldered, chest well out like a pouter-pigeon, sermon case in his pocket, and peace and charity even towards his creditors in his heart—had wisely left the scene of action a quarter of an hour previously, and was walking with the gait and air of a bishop sedately to church. Mrs. Wright had housemaid and cook, and a young woman from a former parish who was in delicate health, all looking through her drawers for unfindable articles of apparel. She did not do much herself, except stand before the glass arranging her curls, varying the proceedings by running to the door at intervals and exclaiming—

“Now, Bella, dear—now Nurse Mary, you good soul—are those children nearly ready? You know their papa cannot bear their going into church late. And, Bella,

will you lend me a pair of your cuffs? and if you have a spare fall—don't take yours off—any old thing will do for me. What a girl it is! I believe, as Mr. Wright says, you would take the gown off your back if you thought any one else wanted it."

At last, something like order being produced out of chaos, the children trooped downstairs and broke out into the drive. Looking, though faded, pretty and ladylike, Mrs. Wright passed into the drawing-room, and, seeing Colonel Leschelles there, said—

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting—but there are such a number of us to get ready. No, don't walk with me, please; I must see to the little ones—and children bore you, I know. I am sure they would me, if they were not my own. Bella—Bella, love—Colonel Leschelles will take care of you. Rosie, darling, come

and mamma will hold your hand—there's a dear."

"No," retorted the dear, clinging to Bella who carried the gorgeous Prayer-book.

"*I'm* going to walk with mamma," said Curran, with a mental eye to future mince-pie and plum-pudding.

"Me too," instantly shouted the latest arrow in the rectorial quiver, rushing off with infantile perversity to secure her mother's disengaged hand; and thus, youngest son on one side, youngest daughter on the other, with seven other pledges of affection in front, and Colonel Leschelles and Bella in rear, Mrs. Wright walked through Fisherton, to the admiration of all beholders.

"I think, Miss Miles," said Colonel Leschelles to his companion, "that I have had the pleasure of seeing you some-

where before. Your face seems quite familiar to me."

Bella shook her head.

"You must be mistaken," she answered, looking up at him with clear, honest, and yet timid eyes as she spoke. "I should have remembered you had I ever seen you since I was quite a little child. I never did forget any one, I think,—unless it might be the strangers who were about me when I had fever in New York," she added, as if imagining he had possibly been one of them:

"I did not know you had been in New York," he remarked. "Are you American by birth, then?"

"Oh no," she replied, and a swift, hot flush came up into her face as she said so. "I went there when I was quite young, with my uncle; but the climate did not suit my health, and so he sent me to a

school near Paris, where I stayed till I came here."

"Then of course we have never met before," he said; "and yet I have seen your double somewhere at some time."

"It must have been a person like me; it could not have been me," she answered simply.

Upon that subject, at all events, Miss Miles had no reserves. As she owned, so far as she knew, no female relative save her mother, and as her mother was as unlike her as it is ever possible for a mother to be, she felt no anxiety on the subject of her accidental resemblance to any human being.

"Do you like Fisherton?" he asked, by way of turning the conversation.

"Very much," she said. "This is such a pleasant change after school life."

"I should have thought it very much

like school," he remarked, with a significant glance ahead.

"You mean the children. Well, perhaps in that way it is. But then there are not so many of them, and they have not been drilled to one pattern. Even when they are naughty they are amusing—perhaps more amusing than at any other time. And for me, this existence means freedom. One can run about and do as one likes—and one gets better things to eat—and one goes out to nice parties sometimes—and Mr. Wright is so kind—and Mrs. Wright has taught me so much—and indeed I shall always love Fisherton—to the last day of my life!"

"See how the old and the young sometimes agree," he said, with a little grimness in his voice. "I like Fisherton now very much better than I imagined it

possible I should ever like any place again. But here we are at the church."

There they were indeed, and the bell had done tolling, and Mr. Wright was already in the reading-desk when the family proceeded up the aisle.

Still holding Rosie by the hand, Mrs. Wright entered the square pew, which with some difficulty contained the twelve persons who now entered into possession of that well-cushioned, well-carpeted, well-hassocked domain.

Down on her knees beside her mother plopped the child, wondering exceedingly; and on her knees she remained till the exhortation had begun, when Mrs. Wright, resuming an erect position, placed Rosie, whose eyes were round as peas with astonishment, on a footstool beside her.

Round and about went Miss Rosie's

glances. She surveyed the roof, the organ-loft, the congregation, and with the intensest curiosity followed the movements of the sexton, as he ushered late arrivals into their pews.

Then suddenly her eye fell on the clergyman, who was at the moment saying—

“With a pure heart and humble voice, unto the throne of the heavenly grace.”

Miss Rosie, recognizing him, cried out in a shrill voice which reached the farthest corner of the church :

“Why, mamma, there’s papa in his night-shirt !”

I am bound to say the congregation behaved nobly at this crisis. First they tittered, and then they coughed ; but, upon the whole, they confined their feelings to their handkerchiefs, which they stuffed into their mouths.

By the time every one was almost in convulsions, it occurred to Rosie that she had misbehaved herself, and looking at Curran, who knelt beside her, she put up her finger inside her lips, and the pair laughed audibly—like the rest.

As for Bella Miles, she rose when the *Venite* commenced, but, unlike the others, she asked Roderick to open the pew door, and walked out of the church, looking like a very ghost.

When she reached home, according to Nurse Mary's account of the proceedings, she fell to laughing and crying on the sofa—laughing till she cried, and crying till she laughed.

“Till indeed, ma'am, I thought I would have to put on my bonnet and fetch the doctor from the sermon.”

CHAPTER IX.

FISHING FOR INFORMATION.

ROSIE'S misbehaviour cast a gloom, so far as Mr. Wright was concerned, over the chastened festivities of Christmas Day. He did not like being the occasion for laughter to others. Many persons are similarly constituted ; and though the prattle of children is doubtless a delightful music, still the Rector opined that when it played such a tune as his youngest born had elected to raise in church, it was quite possible for there to be too much of a good thing. But the next day he recovered his good spirits. He saw some

of his parishioners, and they spoke of the "dear little creature's" speech in a way calculated to soothe his ruffled feathers. Further, by the morning's post came a letter from Mr. Irwin, in answer to one Mr. Wright had posted to him a few days before, inclosing a whole half-year's payment for Bella, which amount, indeed, made up the payment for a whole year, plus the fifty pounds originally lent to the Rev. Dion.

Now, as heretofore, Mr. Wright was eating his corn before it was ripe; but, so long as evil could be staved off and present necessities provided for, little recked the Rector and his wife of the future. With fifty pounds in his pocket, no sickness in the house, and a clear conscience, as he himself would have said, who more happy than the rector of Fisherton—who more ready to laugh at the

misadventure of Christmas Day, and remark—

“You, my dear Colonel, know nothing, from experience, of these sorts of thing; but I assure you parents find them of daily occurrence”?

And then he went on to tell a case which had happened, to his own knowledge, of a child who, seated on a small stool in the drawing-room, heard her mamma remark, concerning some visitors who were driving up the avenue, “How provoking; here are those tiresome H——s again!” and so forth. Changing her tone, however, as the ladies entered, she said, “Dear Mrs. H——! this is an unexpected pleasure! I am so delighted to see you!” Whereupon the *enfant terrible* interposed—“Mamma,” she observed solemnly, “how can you tell such untruths! It is not three minutes since you

said she was a prosy, gossiping, ill-natured old woman, and that she was always calling upon people who did not wish to see her." "Thank you, my dear," said Mrs. H——; "I have heard truth spoken for once in this house;" and so, exit, with a stately courtesy. Exit also the child, a moment after, not of her own free will.

Also he spoke of another sweet darling, who, at luncheon, asked an old lady, from whom the family had great expectations, when she was going to die, as Aunt Helen wanted her diamond ring; and brought forward, in fact, many statements to prove that children have a pernicious habit of saying the right thing at the wrong time, which, if he had only been aware of the fact, was a truth concerning which Colonel Leschelles entertained no manner of doubt.

Passing from the subject of children to

that of unseemly interruptions of public worship, Mr. Wright quoted some curious though not particularly amusing instances in point. As most of these occurred in dissenting places of worship, and in remote districts, he was led naturally to speak of the extraordinary remarks sometimes made from the pulpit in cases where the clergyman was noted for eccentricity; instancing, for example, the text Dean Swift selected when asked to preach a sermon to the tailors of Dublin, the first of which set the then gay city laughing, and the next sent his audience indignant from their seats; also the observation of a well-known minister in the North of Ireland, who, not wishing to be personal, went on to say that, in a pew, sixth from the door, on the left-hand side of the aisle, there was a woman seated—a woman in a red shawl—who was laugh-

ing, and otherwise misbehaving herself. All he had to say to that woman, to whom he should feel loth to direct attention, was, that if for the future she did not conduct herself properly, he would have her turned out. He was sure that slight hint would be enough, he added, and then went on with his sermon.

But when he got to the religious utterances of some of his friends, the dissenters—good men, but imperfectly educated—Mr. Wright, who really could, when his mind was at ease, still tell a story well, made Colonel Leschelles laugh. Not with bad effect, he repeated part of a sermon he once heard delivered on The Prodigal Son. “He came, no shoes to his feet, no coat to his back, in his shirt-sleeves, and *them* grimed with dirt! his beard grown and matted, his hair un-

combed and wild-like, his trousers just hanging together, all in rags and tatters, dirty with living among swine. You know what pigs are, my brethren, and they were no cleaner at that time in the Holy Land than they are in Ulster now. Well, in this plight he came back to his father's house ; and his father fell on his neck and kissed him. Ugh ! I wonder how he could ! ”

More marvellous still, however, was the prayer Mr. Wright stated to have been offered up by a staunch Presbyterian for Queen Adelaide—

“ Oh, Lord ! save Thy servant, our Sovereign Lady the Queen ! Grant that, as she grows an old woman, she may become a new man. Strengthen her with Thy blessing, that she may live a pure virgin before Thee, bringing forth sons and daughters to the glory of God ;

and vouchsafe her Thy blessing, that she may go forth before her people like a he-goat on the mountains !”

To these and other anecdotes of a similar description—notably to that of the old lady parishioner, who, being told by her minister that the “Lord had called him to labour in another part of the vineyard,” answered, “And ye’ll be getting better pay, no doubt; for sure am I if you had not the Lord might have called long enough and loud enough before ye’d have heard him.”—Colonel Leschelles would doubtless have lent a more appreciative ear, had he not been hungering and thirsting to ask some questions about Bella Miles.

At length, despairing of introducing her name naturally, he inquired: “Is that young lady who is now staying at the rectory a countrywoman of yours ?”

“Of mine?” repeated the Rev. Dion. “Certainly not. I should be very glad to claim her, for she is a charming girl; but that is impossible. Her coming to us was the most extraordinary thing in the world—for us, I may say, providential. Though at first I dreaded having a stranger in the house, she has been a blessing to it in every respect. It was all brought about in an extraordinary manner. Her uncle was almost unknown to us, when, one night last summer, I found myself in a serious difficulty. I won’t distress your kind heart by explaining what the nature of the difficulty was. I need only say that I did not know from hour to hour whether Selina and the children might not find themselves houseless and homeless.”

“Dear me!” ejaculated the Colonel,

as Mr. Wright, after this reticent statement, paused to regain composure.

“I was at my wits’ end,” resumed the Rector. “I felt I had better give up the useless struggle of trying to keep a roof over our heads. I felt beaten—and I think you know I have some fight in me still—when Providence put it into my head to ask this stranger—who had taken Sir John Giles’ house while they were abroad—for help. He gave it, sir, instantly. I never before met with such delicate generosity from one on whom I had not even the claim of acquaintanceship. He wrote me out a cheque then and there; and I was so overjoyed, that when I found myself out in the night, and all alone, I could have sobbed like a child. As for Selina, poor dear!—but I need not tell *you* all that creature had suffered.”

“No, indeed,” remarked the Colonel.

“So that is how I came to know Bella’s uncle intimately,” said Mr. Wright, finishing his narrative.

As Colonel Leschelles was aware, it was the way in which the Rev. Dion had come to know a great many people intimately, he only remarked, “And how you came to know Miss Miles too, I presume.”

“Well, yes. At the time Mr. Irwin happened to be looking out for a suitable family in which to find a home for his niece, then at school in France; and it occurred to him that the money he meant to pay would be of use to us, and that we could be of use to his niece—and I trust we have been of use to the dear girl. Selina has taken immense pains—wonderful—in forming her; and she has improved to an extraordinary

degree since she came amongst us. Her uncle is quite delighted with the change. I had a cha-ming letter from him this morning—cha-ming. I have it in my pocket. No, I must have left it at home," added Mr. Wright, colouring a little; for he remembered it might not be prudent to exhibit Mr. Irwin's statement of accounts to his companion.

"Her uncle is wealthy, then?" said Colonel Leschelles interrogatively.

"One of the merchant princes, my dear friend," answered Mr. Wright unctuously, which statement would considerably have astonished Mr. Irwin, had he chanced to hear it.

"Did you say he was married?" asked the Colonel.

Mr. Wright had not said so, but probably imagining he had, replied, "Yes."

"Is not it strange that he did not take Miss Miles to his own home?"

“Evidently,” thought Mr. Wright, “his suspicions have taken the same turn as mine. He imagines Bella to be Mr. Irwin’s daughter.” But he knew better than to let his companion see he comprehended what was passing through his mind, and answered—

“So far as I apprehend the matter, Mr. Irwin has at home a wife with a temper.”

“Poor devil!” said the Colonel compassionately.

“And I think it is very possible she might not care to have a handsome, accomplished girl distracting attention from her. Remember, this is only my idea. All I know for certain is, that she is a very rude sort of person. Why, when Selina called upon her at Riversdale she was ‘not at home,’ and never—positively never—returned the visit.”

“How singular! Then, I presume, all arrangements respecting Miss Miles are made solely with Mr. Irwin?”

“Solely with Mr. Irwin. I have never spoken to his wife, and I have only seen her driving past in her carriage.”

“Does Mr. Irwin resemble his niece? She is very peculiar-looking, you know, and must inherit her face from some one.”

“He is not like her in the least. He is fair, with blue eyes, or light grey eyes, I cannot be quite certain which—a long face, light brown hair, a high forehead, a man of an ordinary type—a man who impresses me, I am sure I cannot tell why, with the idea of having risen from the ranks, and been somehow worsted on the road—a man inclined to be melancholy, and weak—yes, decidedly weak, I should say. He has nothing of

the high-bred look which, no doubt, you have noticed in Bella. He does not alternate as she does, poor child!

‘From grave to gay, from lively to severe.’

He is never very cheerful, and never very dull. Perhaps he ‘does not digest,’ as Sydney Smith used to suggest. The state of a man’s spirits is generally governed by the state of his liver; and I attribute Bella’s customary vivacity to her superb constitution. I never saw a girl enjoy such perfect health. I thought my dear children were pretty well blessed in that respect; but certainly Bella excels them there.”

“Yet she had a bad headache on Christmas Eve, and was hysterical yesterday,” objected Colonel Leschelles.

“True; but her uncle came down, if you remember, on Christmas Eve, and evidently entertained the girl with all

sorts of dismal subjects. He talked, I have no doubt, about her dead parents and his unhappy home, and other matters of the same kind."

"Do you happen to know who her mother was?" asked the Colonel. "Forgive me for putting so many questions; but the girl's face seems perfectly familiar to me."

"Her mother, she says, was Mr. Irwin's sister; and, in answer to an inquiry of Mrs. Wright's, she stated that she believed she resembles her father in appearance."

"And who was he?—what was he?—where did he live?—and where did he die?"

"I do not know. He died abroad somewhere, but where I am sure I have no idea. As to where he lived, Bella gives little information. I suspect, how-

ever, from her knowledge of localities about that part of London, that they resided in Clerkenwell."

"Where on earth is that?" asked the Colonel.

"Well, it lies between the Goswell Road and Farringdon Road—between Snow Hill and Pentonville. I do not think I can give you any nearer clue to its whereabouts."

"Oh, indeed!" commented the other. "Perhaps he carried on some trade or business there. Do you know what he was?"

"Ah! now you puzzle me altogether. 'That is your own question, and you must answer it yourself,' as my countryman remarked."

"And may I inquire upon what occasion it was that your countryman made the polite observation you have quoted?" asked Colonel Leschelles, a little irritably.

“Well,” answered Mr. Wright, laughing at his friend’s touchiness, “he proposed a game, one of the conditions of which was, that if any one of the players could not answer his own question he must pay a forfeit—Pat himself leading off with the inquiry how it happened that a rabbit made her hole without casting out any earth. None of the company being able to account for the phenomenon, the Irishman explained that ‘she began at the other end.’ Whereupon some one, utterly amazed, cried out, ‘But how does she do that?’ ‘Ah!’ said Pat, ‘that is your own question; answer it yourself!’ And that is precisely what I am obliged to say to you. If you can obtain from either Mr. Irwin or Miss Miles the slightest clue to the nature of Mr. Miles’ occupation while on earth, where he came from, and who his father was, you will

be much cleverer than your humble servant."

Colonel Leschelles, knowing that, as regarded recondite researches concerning the antecedents of any human being whose histories they wished to investigate, many talents had been given to the Rev. Dionysius Wright and Selina his wife—talents which they had not kept hidden in a napkin—made no reply to his friend's exhaustive statement. He felt, where they had failed, he was not likely to succeed, and for some reason, unintelligible then even to himself, he was very anxious to know more of Miss Miles' past and Miss Miles' progenitors than he seemed at all likely to ascertain.

"It must be a little unpleasant for you," he said at length, referring to the fact of having such a mystery boarding, washing, and lodging at the rectory.

“I do not feel any unpleasantness now, I assure you,” said Mr. Wright, cheerfully beating a tattoo on the front of his top-coat, inside of which lay, crisp and snug, Mr. Irwin’s letter and his welcome cheque. “You see, she is such a dear, good creature; and one hundred a year is one hundred a year, to a man with twelve children, an appearance to keep up, and a position to maintain.”

“The uncle pays you a hundred per annum, then?” interrogated Colonel Leschelles.

“That was his own offer, and I need not say I did not urge him to reduce it,” said the Rector.

“No; I suppose not,” said his companion, looking with his outward eyes up and down the flat, marshy, uninteresting valley of the Thames, as it presents itself to the beholder at Fisherton—vainly

searching mentally for some small fish to attach itself to his hook—and finally coming to the conclusion that no fish, whether great or little, was to be landed by means of any bait he could present.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLONEL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

THERE is an uncertainty about fishing. It is curious to consider how one's experience varies according to the locality in which one resides.

At a remote period of my life, I should have said positively that, given any decent sort of weather, a fisher need never have returned from a fishing expedition empty; but in that case, he had to seek his prey in the sea.

Recently, I know it is very possible for a man to spend hours—days—weeks—

months in this enticing occupation, and catch nothing. Not far from where these lines are being written, there is a bridge, described in the local guide-books as being of stone, and very handsome; and indeed it is a graceful and substantial structure. It spans a river, part of which is dear to anglers; and from it a near view is to be obtained of a pretty village and a church.

On that bridge there stands perpetually a man fishing. No one has ever known him to bring anything from the lower depths up to his own level, though it has been rumoured that he was once heard informing a friend of some special good fortune, in which a jack of five pounds' weight played a conspicuous part.

Which brings me back to my own sheep. Not a stone's throw—a child's stone-throw, I mean—from our

accustomed sitting-room there is another bridge, over a stream.

The stream is neither very wide nor very deep; and the bridge is consequently not handsome, or built of stone.

Nevertheless, it is very pretty. It is covered and festooned with ivy; and on a favourable day, when one stands upon it looking down into the wider water lying riverwards, one can see plenty of fine fish making circles and ripples, and then disappearing, to re-appear, a few minutes after, a little farther off.

In this water, which would seem to present a fair prospect to an angler, a certain youth undertook to lure, with cunning hand, perch, dace, jack and roach to land.

He fished and he fished. He began early in the morning. He was still hopeful at mid-day. He stood calmly

expectant on the bank in the afternoon, and evening found him unwearied with his ill-success.

For indeed he never caught any creature worth calling a fish—since it is not easy to cook a piscine baby about a day old, and consisting of a head and tail and no body. Of these useless innocents he would have made a collection in a large water-butt, had they not been summarily turned back into the stream; but the wiser and older fish refused to listen to his wooing.

Nevertheless he persevered. He tried all baits and all hooks, and had perfect faith, if he failed to-day, he must have a full basket to-morrow.

In especial he pinned his hopes on a certain jack, which he represented as residing amongst the weeds and eating its smaller neighbours. According to his

statement, this jack was a creature of enormous size—a sort of Daniel Lambert amongst pike: and he never lost his bait, nor had his hook carried off, but he declared the jack had been at his line again.

Had his statement been correct, that pike would have been as full of hooks as a Christmas pudding is of plums.

Once a girl, curious to know what really was at the end of his line, picked up the rod he had laid on the bank, and found an unfortunate perch, about two inches long, well hooked. Releasing it, she threw the foolish creature back into the water; and when the angler returned, he solemnly declared, “That jack has been at his old tricks again!”

On another occasion, the whole household was solemnly asked to assemble and see the landing of the big pike.

“I’ve got him at last!” said the angler, hauling away with eager hands. “There!—there!—don’t you see him now?”

Some of the spectators were polite enough to say they saw the prey, and others were truthful enough to say they saw nothing of the kind. Nevertheless every one believed the pike’s hour had come, as the line was drawn slowly in—slowly and carefully—with a great bunch of weeds!

After this it was necessary to speak plainly, and say, as it was impossible to live upon the faith of a supposititious jack, some fish must be caught—caught too, by a particular day.

The day came, and though three animals, which might have looked well through a microscope, were brought in, no human being out of a lunatic asylum

could have thought of cooking them ; and the domestic atmosphere was clouded when there came, from a non-preserved part of the stream, observe, where Dick, Tom, and Harry are free to spend their Sunday mornings, and all the other many idle hours Satan allows them for recreation, a basket full of the finest fresh-water fish eye could desire to see.

It is a melancholy fact that successful angling, like kissing, goes by favour.

You may woo the stream patiently, skilfully, perseveringly ; you may be constant in season and out of season, and not get enough in return to pay for your tackle, and then there comes along some careless stranger who casts his line at random, or some impudent, ragged young varlet, armed only with a crooked pin and a piece of twine, and you shall see him carry off the prize your soul has longed

for; the ewe-lamb out of the water you had almost come to consider your own.

Which brings me to the moral I desire to draw. People who go fishing on land often find themselves much in the same condition as those who go angling in streams and rivers. They bait with likely questions—they choose their time, place, and opportunity, and the result is generally *nil*; and then suddenly, when they had no thought of getting what they want, their fish is hauled to land, and lies on the bank beside them, waiting for the fatal blow.

Colonel Leschelles proved the truthfulness of this theory. He angled with a light line and delicate flies in the uncertain waters of Mrs. Wright's nature, and the only treasure he produced from those depths and shallows was, that Mrs. Wright did not like Bella Miles.

“I am very sorry for her, of course, poor child, and I would do her any service in my power; but for me to love, it is necessary I should understand, and I confess I do not understand Bella—I wish I did.”

“The uncle might have saved *his* money,” thought Colonel Leschelles. “The niece’s investment will, I think, turn out better.”

Then he tried Miss Miles, by asking her leading questions and endeavouring to surprise her, and came out of the encounter a defeated man. Miss Miles was prepared at all points. There was nothing to be got out of her.

Ere long also he had an opportunity of making Mr. Irwin’s acquaintance; but Mr. Irwin proved a greater mystery than his niece. He traced back his career to the earliest period, only to find nothing

in it beyond the common, unless, indeed, it might be that the man's cleverness had somehow compassed success.

Of his antecedents Mr. Irwin made no secret. He and his sister, being early left orphans, were obliged to shift for themselves, and did so, she as nursery governess in the house of a relative, he as apprentice, clerk, manager to a firm of die-sinkers in Soho, where he remained till he went to America.

His sister met her husband at the house where she was governess. He took a fancy to her, and she to him, and they were married. That was the true and straightforward story, my dear friends, you will perceive, such as is told us every day by some one. Not a word in it which could not have been verified on oath, and yet conveying a series of false impressions to the mind of the hearer.

Only one more piece of information did Colonel Leschelles essay to obtain, and he obtained it in this wise.

“Mr. Miles was a doctor, was he not?”

“Oh dear, no!” answered Mr. Irwin.

“He was a jack-of-all-trades.”

“And ——,” suggested the Colonel.

“Master of all,” was the reply; “or at least, pretty nearly so. A clever man—so clever a man that I think he might have done anything he chose, had he only made up his mind to a certain course, and followed it. Veering and changing about were his ruin.”

“Ah!” said the Colonel, and, fairly beaten, dropped the subject.

“What a stupid creature the world makes a fellow,” he thought. “Here am I, who ought to know better, suspecting a mystery where evidently none exists. The father was a ‘ne’er-do-weel,’ doubt-

less, and perhaps came from some poor, wicked, half-mad old stock, which accounts for Miss Bella's beauty, talent, and eccentricity. Besides, why should I try to unravel the antecedents of this uncle and niece? What are they to me?"

Which would have been a prudent question once, but was now incapable of receiving a suitable answer; for the Colonel was in love with this girl, and pulses which for years had throbbed slowly and regularly, beat rapidly when she entered the room where he sat, or walked beside him along those dull, endless, muddy Fisherton roads. For which reason—seeing she was in her teens, and he, Heaven only knew how near threescore and ten—he would thankfully have received the news that she was illegitimate, or that her father had been hung, or her mother divorced.

All he wanted was Bella; and he dimly grasped the truth that, unless there was something very questionable about Bella's antecedents, about the life-story of her father and mother, he might want that young lady for a very long time.

Not twenty, exceedingly beautiful, amiable, accomplished, owning one rich relation at all events, it was not in the slightest degree likely she would cast a favourable eye on a man capable of being her great-grandfather; and yet—and yet the Colonel had his ideas and his hopes, and so went fishing from day to day. And still he landed nothing; and it was in a moment of utter despair that chance gave him the clue after which he had so long been searching.

“His dears,” as Mr. Wright complaisantly called his children, had all been bidden to a Twelfth-night party.

They were well goloshed and warmly wrapped up to walk to the entertainment, attended by Mr. Wright, and that gentleman had rushed out of the dining-room to see that his general attire was as scrupulously perfect and utterly clerical as usual, when Bella Miles entered the apartment and walked up to the table without perceiving that the Colonel sat in shadow beside the fire, which was burning low.

“Oh!” she said, when she did see him; “I beg your pardon. I did not know you were here.”

Whereupon he laughed, and asked if he were such an ogre that his presence should prevent her entering any room in which he happened to be.

He had never before seen her look so handsome or so remarkable. Her white dress, knotted up with black ribbons, for

she wore slight mourning out of respect to Mr. Irwin's memory; her round arms clasped by jet bracelets, lent for the occasion by Mrs. Wright; her shoulders covered by a red opera cloak, trimmed with white fur, the hood of which, drawn close about her face, enriched it with a setting of soft, snow-like down. As she stooped a little forward, the hood fell back from her head; and with a sudden exclamation, Colonel Leschelles rose astonished, and said—

“Why, it is Molly Barthorne you so much resemble! Standing as you do now, I could fancy she herself had stepped down from her frame.”

And then he stopped, for the flowers had dropped from Bella's fingers, and she was looking at him with dilated, frightened eyes.

“What is the matter?” he asked

anxiously. "Are you ill?" And he hurriedly poured out first some water, and then some wine.

"No," she said, rejecting both; "I am not ill, thank you. Who is Molly Bar-thorne? Where does she live?"

"She does not live anywhere now," he answered. "She was a celebrated court beauty once upon a time, however; and you might be her sister, so great is the likeness between you."

"Oh! don't," entreated Bella, "don't say so to anybody but me! Colonel Leschelles, don't be vexed with me, please; but may I trust you never to mention this to any one else? I cannot tell you why I ask; but will you do me this kindness?"

She held her hands out to him appealingly, and he took them, as he answered—

"My dear, you might trust me with

your life. I would do anything on earth for you. A word of this shall never pass my lips. Now, gather up your flowers and go; Mr. Wright is calling you."

Which, indeed, was true. At the top of his voice Mr. Wright was saying, "Bella! Bella! Bella! Where are you? We are all ready; don't keep us waiting the whole evening."

"Here I am," said Bella, coming out of the dining-room, and interrupting the pastoral, Mr. Wright, imagining her to be upstairs, was delivering from the bottom of the flight. I did not know you were ready. I was only getting a few flowers."

And drawing her hood over her head, she stepped out into the darkness, that Mr. Wright might not see her face.

CHAPTER XI.

SLIGHTLY IN ADVANCE.

“SELINA,” said Mr. Wright next day, “I have bad news for you.”

Mr. Wright imparted this intelligence at luncheon, whilst engaged in carving the dilapidated remains of a fowl which had done duty on the previous night. Mrs. Wright looked inquiringly at her husband over the cruet-stand, and Colonel Leschelles, knowing what was coming, fixed his eyes on the table-cloth.

“Yes, very bad news,” repeated the Rector, finding his better half remained

mute. Our dear friend is obliged to leave us to-morrow."

"No, surely not!" exclaimed Mrs. Wright, with a start, and an expression of decorous tenderness directed towards the veteran Colonel. "I thought—that is, I hoped——"

"I know you are goodness itself," remarked the Colonel, as she did not finish her sentence; "and I would impose upon your kindness a little longer were it not absolutely necessary for me to leave Fisherton. When a man of my age," added the Colonel bravely, "finds any business to attend to, he is foolish not to do so at once."

"Of your age indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Wright, with a jolly assurance, calculated to make an elderly gentleman fancy his memory must have been playing him tricks.

"I think you grow younger every year, Colonel," added Mrs. Wright mendaciously. "I am sure you will never seem old, you have such a buoyant nature and such boyish spirits."

"You have a genius for saying pleasant things," remarked the Colonel in answer to Mrs. Wright's implied compliment.

"Truthful things, I trust," she answered, with a plaintive smile. "It seems to me that truth should always walk first, and pleasantness follow after."

"Admirable!" said the Reverend Dion, who never failed to applaud his wife's artistic utterances.

"But I cannot deceive myself any longer," went on the Colonel, as though neither host nor hostess had interrupted his sentence. "Like many another, I have gone on through life, forgetting time was running on too; and

now, when I suddenly awaken, I find, what my friends have doubtless known for many a day, that notwithstanding my buoyant nature and boyish spirits, as you, Mrs. Wright, are good enough to call them, I am an old man—'terribly old,' so Curran informed me this morning."

"The naughty boy," exclaimed Mrs. Wright; "I will punish him for his rudeness."

"I hope you will not punish the child for speaking the truth," said Colonel Leschelles a little sarcastically. "Moreover," he added, watching Mrs. Wright furtively while he spoke, "Miss Miles read Master Curran a very pretty lecture on politeness in general, and respect to his elders in particular."

"Oh, indeed! I was not aware that Miss Miles considered herself competent to instruct any one."

“Tush, my dear!” said Mr. Wright, who, though not above being affected by small matters himself, did honestly despise what he called the babbling and bubbling of women’s trumpery jealousies. “Bella Miles is as true a lady as I should ever desire to meet, though I grant you she may be a little ignorant of some of *les convenances*. She is a good girl too, kindly, unselfish, generous; and if she did scold the young rogue, I’ll be bound he deserved every word of it.”

“Master Curran is young, and time will doubtless temper the present extreme frankness of his manners,” remarked Colonel Leschelles; “but I cannot help saying that when out of the softening influence of his mother’s society the child is somewhat apt to be uncivil.”

“I am very sorry,” answered Mrs. Wright, “that any son of mine should

ever appear rude to such a valued friend as you are."

Whereupon the Colonel rejoined, "Dear Mrs. Wright, do you imagine that truth could ever offend me? Few, indeed, have the art of presenting literal and unpleasant facts in a coating of sugar. Yourself and Mr. Wright have the happy knack of making deformity itself look beautiful; but then in that, as in most other things, you are thorough artists."

"I trust not—I hope not," cried Mrs. Wright. "We are sincere. Whatever our faults may be, we are utterly sincere, I can assure you."

"There is no necessity for you to do so, dear," interposed Mr. Wright. "The Colonel knows all that."

"Indeed," said the Colonel, "there is no one knows better than I how sincere Mrs. Wright is."

In reply to which ambiguous speech Selina impulsively presented her thin ladylike hand to the Colonel, who pressed it, and bowed, and then returned it to the whilom Dublin beauty, with all the decorous gallantry of a race now well-nigh extinct.

“Now, Leschelles,” said the Rector, who, after trying in vain to satisfy the cravings of a healthy appetite with the drumstick of a patriarchal cock, had fallen back upon bread, washed down by a few glasses of the Colonel’s admirable sherry, “I will only let you away on one condition, namely, that you come back for our confirmation. It will be a very pretty sight, and I should like you to meet the Bishop.”

“And our two girls are to be confirmed,” added Mrs. Wright.

“And Bella Miles,” supplemented the

Rector. "You must promise to come to us. You have never been at Fisherton yet in decent weather."

"Fisherton in any weather," Colonel Leschelles was beginning, when Mr. Wright cut across his speech.

"Come, come, that is no answer. Say we may count on your company. You will not regret honouring us with it. The confirmation will, I assure you, be a very pretty sight—very pretty indeed."

The Rector had been at great pains to pronounce the word pretty—usually a snare to his countrymen—correctly, and having eschewed the pitfalls represented by "pratty" and "prutty," into which Irish people generally tumble, he had finally arrived at the conclusion that there was only one correct way of uttering pretty, viz., to make the *e* the same as in pet.

Quite convinced he had at length conquered the difficulty, Mr. Wright aired the word on all possible occasions, and with an emphasis which of course drew attention to it.

“My sister is going to present Maria with her dress for the occasion,” went on the Rector, “and very pret-ty she will look in it, though, perhaps, I ought not to say so.”

“She gives great promise of beauty,” said the Colonel, who was considered, and who considered himself, a judge in such matters. “She grows very like her mother.”

“Oh! Colonel,” exclaimed Mrs. Wright, with a little modest bridling and graceful deprecation of the implied compliment that reminded Mr. Wright of the days when he could not eat, or drink, or sleep for thinking of her countless charms.

“She is not so pretty yet,” continued the Colonel calmly; “but I think she will be. She is certainly a nice-looking girl.” Then, without allowing Mrs. Wright time for further protest, he proceeded to ask if the Bishop were a judge of wine.

“I don’t think any man deserves to be a bishop who is not,” said Mr. Wright jocosely.

“Then in that case, if I bring myself, I should like to be allowed to bring the wine also,” explained Colonel Leschelles.

“Bring yourself—that is all we want,” answered Mr. Wright.

“I shall certainly do that,” answered the Colonel; “but I should like to hear the Bishop’s opinion of some port I had sent to me just as I was starting for Fisherton.”

“Do as you like,” agreed Mr. Wright.

“We understand what you mean—don’t we, Selina? The Colonel would not object to see his old friend’s lot cast in even more pleasant pastures than Fisherton.”

“I should like to see you a bishop,” rejoined the Colonel, who certainly thought the sight of Mr. Wright as a “my lord,” and Mrs. Wright as a “my lord’s lady,” would have been cheap at fifty pounds a head.

“You are a friend in need to us,” said Mrs. Wright, who had been exercising her mind, as had also the Rev. Dion his mind, on the subject of wine for the successor of the Galilean Fishermen.

In the privacy of the conjugal chamber they had decided to invite the Colonel to the episcopal feast, hoping he “might offer to send a little wine.” It had been quite beyond their calculation that he

would honour the feast himself, and provide all the wine.

“We may as well make a luncheon party,” suggested Mrs. Wright, when talking the matter over the same evening with her husband. “Luncheon need not cost us a great deal. People do not much care what they have to eat, so long as they have plenty of good wine.”

Which observation argued a considerable amount of worldly knowledge on the part of Mrs. Wright.

“And his wine is A 1,” said Mr. Wright, nothing loth to give honour where it was due.

“Some of it is almost as old as himself,” remarked Mrs. Wright, who could not forgive Colonel Leschelles’ strictures on Curran. “My dear Dion, how touchy the poor man is about his age.”

“To a thoughtful man, even if he be

sufficiently religious, age is a very serious thing," answered the Rev. Dion, who never had a finger ache without wondering how Selina and the little ones would get on if he were taken from them.

"He is certainly looking, to quote Curran, 'terribly old.' When I see his poor lean body buttoned up so tightly in that close-fitting top-coat, I feel as if some day when he unfastens it he will drop to pieces. How absurd he is still to affect all the airs of juvenility."

Which remark of Mrs. Wright's was indeed quite true ; but how hard a matter it is to grow 'old gracefully ! After all, it is not easy to greet sorrow, or poverty, or reverses, or dishonour with a smiling face. And there are many people to whom age seems less endurable than grief, or shortness of money, or the cold looks of friends and acquaintances. For

grief may be subdued, and in lieu of lost fortune another may be found ; while if old friends have no cordial greetings, old acquaintances no longer wear bright faces, the wise man understands precisely how to value their former professions and kindnesses, and turns his attention to new people, who may be pleasanter and more faithful.

But for old age—ah! my friends, we must have grown very weary of the road, very tired of the inns by the way—very, very sure that all earthly good is vanity, before we can feel quite thankful and satisfied to know youth, sweet, bright youth is gone, and may return never more—that manhood's prime is past likewise—that the morning sun and the mid-day have shone their last for us, and that we shall never behold more any radiance save the solemn glory which prefaces—night.

Colonel Leschelles did not feel all this then, and Mrs. Wright found fault with him for refusing to look at the clock.

She did not know he had a dream that the pleasantest part of life might still be in store for him. She had not the faintest idea that the while his thoughts should have been on wills, they were dwelling on wives.

If she had, having that beautiful maternal eye, of which we hear so much, directed to the interests of her children, it is scarcely likely she would have parted with the Colonel with all the touching interest she did.

“God bless you!” said the Rev. Dion, as his visitor stepped into the fly which was to convey him to Fisherton Station.

“Good-bye, good-bye,” echoed Mrs. Wright from the steps, while the children clustering about, shouted, “Good-bye, Colonel!” and waved their mites of

handkerchiefs, as did their mother her French cambric adorned with lace.

In truth, Mrs. Wright was delighted to see the last of their visitor. She had been on drill for so long a time, that she longed for the matutinal cup of tea in bed, the easy lounge before the drawing-room fire, the scrambling meals, the cosy *tête-à-tête* with Dion after the children were all in bed.

Not a strong woman naturally, and less strong in arithmetical proportion to every young Wright who, in the midst of harass and distress, had made his or her way into this wicked world, the strain of a martinet visitor in the house tried her more year by year.

“I have *never* been so tired of the Colonel before,” she said, breaking into an hysterical whimper in her husband’s study after the visitor’s departure.

"My dear, he is a prince," answered Mr. Wright; and he handed her a cheque for five-and-twenty pounds.

Selina took it.

"To which of the children do you think he will leave his money, Dion?" she asked.

If you consider, my reader, women are proverbially ungrateful. I am afraid Mrs. Wright was.

"To none," answered the Rev. Dion.

It so chances, my reader, that occasionally men are gifted with a wonderful foreknowledge,

Intuitively Mr. Wright felt the relations between himself and Colonel Leschelles had changed. He could not have given any reason for the faith which was in him, but he was sure.

He comprehended, vaguely perhaps, but still certainly, that the Colonel had

passed beyond him, and would spend no more Christmas Days in his house.

He did not know the disturbing influence was Bella Miles; but as one vaguely feels the presence of thunder, he felt there was a fresh element at work. And, indeed, how should he know! There was Miss Bella, as kind, as ready, as inscrutable as ever. There was the Colonel absent.

How on earth was the Rector, whose thoughts never wandered very far afield, to comprehend the Colonel was going to Abbotsleigh to hunt up the Barthorne lineage?

In the course of the next three months the Colonel did not find all he had set out to discover, but he discovered enough to induce him to take a furnished house at Daceford, and write thence to his friends at Fisherton :—

“I am located here by my doctor’s orders, for a few months, and shall hope to run over to the Rectory and have the pleasure of seeing you and Mrs. Wright at my little cottage whenever you have a spare afternoon to waste upon an invalid.”

In reply Mr. Wright shook hands on paper cordially with the gallant Colonel.

He was delighted to have him for so near a neighbour; but why did he not come and take up his abode at the Rectory—or, if not at the Rectory, why not at Simpson’s Retreat? Simpson’s Retreat was the perfection of a country snugger, and he might have had it for a pound a week.

However, both regrets and reproaches being in vain, Mr. Wright would take an early opportunity of calling on his friend,

Selina, he regretted to say, was ill—very ill. The doctors ordered her to the

seaside; but how she was to get to the seaside Mr. Wright professed himself unable to imagine.

Things had, however, turned up miraculously for them (himself and Selina) so often that it seemed a mere doubting of Providence to doubt now.

To this very palpable hint the Colonel did not respond immediately.

“There is an obtuseness about the man I do not quite understand,” observed Mr. Wright to his better-half.

“My dear Dion, he is getting very old,” said the lady, with a little sob. She had set her heart on going to the seaside, and she was not well—far from it, indeed.

When Easter had passed, however, and Lent, as a matter of course, also (it may not be quite amiss to remark that every day during Lent Mr. Wright thanked

Heaven there were no leanings to Popery about him), the Colonel began to think Mrs. Wright would really be better away from Fisherton, and, having arrived at this conclusion, he one day took Mr. Wright aside, and "hoped he would not feel offended if he asked him whether pecuniary matters had any share in preventing Mrs. Wright having the change she so greatly needed."

In answer Mr. Wright wrung Colonel Leschelles' hand, and saying, with effusion, "he could have no secrets from such a friend," told him precisely how they were situated, the result of which touching confidence was that twenty pounds changed hands, and Mrs. Wright and her very latest baby, accompanied by a servant, and Rosie, and Curran, started for the nearest seaport on an early day.

As a natural consequence Mr. Wright

was much at Daceford, and Colonel Leschelles very much indeed at Fisherton Rectory, where, the young ladies of the Wright family eschewing the task of entertaining their papa's friend, Miss Bella Miles was usually charged with the burden of receiving and amusing him.

Did she object to undertaking it? By no means. In those days of unrestricted intercourse she formed a very sincere liking for the officer—no longer young. Had she been a different sort of girl, she might even have gone the length of imagining she loved him.

And, in truth, she did love him, though not in the way he desired.

When, in the time to come, she summed up her opinion of him, it amounted to this—

“He is the truest gentleman I ever

knew, and the staunchest friend woman could desire in her extremest need."

And that was all? Yes, all there could ever be.

The girl beheld the years stretching between them the man had forgotten; and never for one moment did it enter into her mind that he could regard her save as grandchild or daughter, till he asked her to be his wife.

When—but I anticipate:

With Mrs. Wright at the seaside, and the household moralities uninfluenced by Selina's gentle presence, events occurred at the rectory which never could have happened had she been at the helm.

When she returned and discovered the chaos her absence had wrought, she said plaintively, "I must never leave you again, Dion."

"No, my dear," answered the Reverend

Dion, "you had better take the whole responsibility the next time. No matter how things turn out, be sure I will not blame you;" which was a slight rap over the knuckles administered by the Reverend Dion; for Mrs. Wright had blamed him most severely for his management of matters during her absence.

"If you had only given me a hint, I would have come back, even had the journey killed me," she said.

"How could I give you a hint when I had not a suspicion myself?" he answered.

"She is a bad, designing girl," said Mrs. Wright, "and I always thought so," at which juncture the Reverend Dion remained judiciously silent.

CHAPTER XII.

“NOTHING COULD BE BETTER.”

FISHERTON was looking its best—its very best, indeed—though Mr. Wright, with that tendency to differ from other people, which was a way he had of asserting originality of opinion, declared Fisherton was only perfect in August, when every garden presented a blaze of colour—when the orchards were full of ripened fruit—when the creamy flowers of the magnolia showed themselves from amidst the green polished leaves—when the myrtle buds were opening and the gum-cistus unfold-

ing its beauties one hour and scattering them on the earth the next.

“At that season,” pronounced Mr. Wright, “I first beheld Fisherton. At that season the place is perfect.”

And the Fisherton aborigines hearkened to the voice of this Solomon who had come to sit in judgment upon the beauties of their native village, and were well pleased with the Rector’s dictum.

“Though I will still uphold,” said one ancient pensioner sturdily, “that Fisherton be main pretty when the May is all a-bloom, and smelling so purely sweet, and the throstle a-singing his throat out, and the lads and the lassies wandering through the lanes shaded with green limes—sweethearting, as I used to do myself once; but that is an old story now.”

His love-making might be an old story,

but the man's notion that Fisherton was “main pretty” in May and the early summer chanced to be still quite true. No pooh-poohing of the Reverend Dion could rob the hawthorns of the white glory which covered them, or take the scent of the May from the clear air, or retard the opening of the dog-roses, or remove the buttercups out of the meadows, or the bright green, the pure, bright spring green off the foliage.

After the winter floods—after the snow and frost, and rain and hail—after grey skies and lowering fogs, Fisherton always came forth beautiful in the spring, as if newly created. Verdure everywhere—the fresh smell which comes with the rising sap, the songs of birds, the hum of bees. A sweet valley when the waters had subsided—when the Thames flowed quietly within due bounds on his way to the

sea. Yes, then, before the summer droughts had parched the earth—before the reaper had cut the corn—while there was still bud, and promise of fruit, Fisherton, set around with May, and lilac, and laburnum, with chestnut-trees bursting into flower, with the red hawthorn and the redder japonica all ablaze in the cottagers' gardens, looked its beautiful best.

It was afternoon, and two young men, who had been fishing, sauntered idly up from the Thames, and turned their steps towards the village.

One was the son of a rich man, who had a few months previously bought Fisherton Lodge, the great place of that small neighbourhood; the other a baronet, whose acquaintance Mr. Morrison's heir had made at Oxford, where parvenus go to make friends.

The first young fellow was clever, and short-sighted; for perhaps both of which reasons he disfigured himself by constantly wearing a glass screwed up into his eye. The second was not clever in the ordinary sense of the word, and not short-sighted; but he had an advantage over his fellow—it was only needful to look at and to like him.

A man fleeing for his life, and coming unexpectedly upon the pair, would at once have said to himself, “I can trust you,” meaning Sir Harry; “I will not trust you,” meaning Bob Morrison; and yet there can be no doubt that Bob Morrison would have helped him loyally, had he seen his way to rendering assistance: only he would first have wanted to know so much, that any poor wretch in a difficulty might scarcely have relished his cross-examination.

With Sir Harry, on the contrary, he would have helped the man on the instant, and possibly never asked a question.

Foolish, no doubt; and yet, as we know, Providence takes care of drunken people and fools. Providence had taken remarkably good care of the young baronet.

So far, though he had been cheated more than once, and disappointed as regarded the antecedents of his *protégés* over and over again, Sir Harry's memory held no shameful secret, recalled no enormous iniquity.

Left very young fatherless, brought up by a mother who idolised him, adored by his pretty cousin Edith, flattered by his private tutor, surrounded at Oxford by those who would gladly have let him walk over them had he expressed a desire to that effect, Sir Harry had fallen no prey to sharks or flatterers. When men talked

about his faults and follies, no scandalous flutter of petticoats disturbed the air. He had not run into debt to such an extent as seriously to embarrass his estate. His transactions with those good Jews who kindly look after the pecuniary welfare of young Christians were confined to two little bill affairs, in both of which he had lent his name to a friend, and lost his money. He had made no great success at college, but neither had he made any great *fiasco*; and as time went on, there was only the same story to be repeated of his life.

His mother wanted him to go into Parliament, and marry his cousin; but Sir Harry did not seem inclined to pleasure her Ladyship as regarded either whim.

Nevertheless, with that pertinacity for which even the gentlest women are

remarkable, Lady Medburn felt quite certain her dear Harry would yet add his wisdom to that of the rulers of the people, and make Edith mistress of Cortingford, (the name of the family seat,) and his poor mother happy.

Edith was the daughter of Lady Medburn's only sister. That sister had run away from her father's vicarage with a handsome young ensign, who speedily left her an almost penniless widow, with one little girl.

On her death-bed she bequeathed this child to Lady Medburn, and Miss Edith's life had consequently proved a most desirable affair ever since she wore short white frocks and long blue sashes.

Lady Medburn had no sons or daughters save her Harry, and there was no Miss Medburn to make a wearisome affair of existence to the young dependent, for

which reason she, though utterly penniless, had grown up with all the assured certainty of position which might have become an heiress of the house.

Yes, it had long been decided at Corringford that Edith was to be the next Lady Medburn; and if there were those who said Sir Harry would never be more to her than cousin, the majority opined he would settle down some day, and marry Miss Selham, if only to please his mother.

At seven and twenty, however, the baronet seemed as far off settling and matrimony as ever; and it did not occur to Lady Medburn and Miss Selham, on that particular day when Fisherton was looking its best, that there was any especial need of their prayers to avert the calamity of marriage from so heart-whole a young man.

“What’s all this?” exclaimed Mr. Morrison, as he and his friend, turning a corner, came in sight of the church. “Carriages—servants—children, of course. Oh! the confirmation! I had forgotten it, though I saw three washing-baskets full of flowers, sent in honour of the occasion, yesterday. Let us stop, Medburn, and have a look at the girls as they come out.”

They had not long to wait. Already the ceremony was over, and the little bustle of leaving commencing. Coachmen were bringing their horses up to the gate of the churchyard, footmen were flying from the porch to the road, and from the road back again to the porch. The feeble, aged women at the almshouses opposite were shading their eyes with one hand, and holding back obstreperous little urchins with the other.

On the tiled roofs the pigeons plumed themselves, as if waiting for the congregation to admire their beauty. Glimpses were caught at intervals of the Rev. Dionysius bustling about on business connected with his Lordship the Bishop; and all this time people were defiling out of the church, singly, by twos and threes, forming groups amongst the grass-covered graves, or walking away solitary and silent, having no one to whom to speak. Even at a village gathering one may always see a few lonely and neglected inhabitants.

At last came the girls, the commonalty first, the *élite* last—a goodly company.

There was naughty Polly Prickley, the most audacious romp in Fisherton, looking as demure in her light cotton dress and plain cap, coquettishly worn, as if she had spent every hour since babyhood

in reading tracts and reciting the Psalms. There was Victoria, daughter and heiress of Sir John and Lady Giles, of Riversdale, tricked out like a bride, with everything on her a milliner could suggest and wealth and vanity secure, and an expression on her face which said plainly—

“ Good people, look at me. Though I am so charmingly dressed and so handsome, and though I am the only child of my papa, Sir John Giles, and though he is going to give me a splendid fortune, I have just renounced the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. You may be surprised to hear the news; but it is true. Ask the Bishop if you are inclined to disbelieve me.”

“ Gracious heavens!” exclaimed Mr. Robert Morrison, as he beheld this young lady ambling along to her papa’s carriage, “ would any other woman

except Lady Giles have sent her daughter out dressed for such an occasion like a May Queen? No, my dear, it is of no use your looking so graciously at me. I am engaged; and if I were not, I would never marry you, Miss Vic. Do regard that young person, Medburn, and contrast her with the lilies of the field, which she only resembles in so far as she neither toils nor spins.”

But his companion would not regard Miss Giles. His attention was fixed on three other young people, who walked slowly and decorously out of the porch—the very last to leave the church.

“Morrison, who is that lovely girl?” asked Sir Harry. Hearing which question, Mr. Morrison adjusted his eye-glass, and surveyed the group.

“That—oh! that is our Rector’s eldest daughter. Pretty, undeniably, and the

dress becomes her. Maria Wright. The Rector has a baker's dozen. Mrs. Wright is at Southsea with the latest addition to the family. Now, the show is over, shall we be going home?"

Their homeward way led them past the line of carriages, and Mr. Robert Morrison had to raise his hat frequently, and to pause often when some demonstrative lady beckoned him to her side.

From a distance, however, he was at length hailed by his father.

"Hallo! Robert," shouted that worthy, "what are you doing here?"

"We have been following the occupation of the first disciples, and admiring the doings of their descendants," was the reply.

"In other words," added Sir Harry, who saw that Mr. Morrison looked puzzled, "we have been fishing, and

we have been admiring the young ladies of Fisherton.”

“Well, it was a pretty sight,” said Mr. Morrison, who had stayed away from a committee meeting in order to support Mr. Wright on the occasion, and meet the Bishop afterwards.

“I saw one very pretty sight,” agreed the baronet.

“He means Maria Wright,” explained Mr. Robert compassionately.

“Now, do not be ill-natured, Robert,” entreated his parent; “the girl is pretty, very much so indeed. Looks quite like a what do you call it, in all that light drapery.”

“I suppose you mean a seraph, sir?” suggested his son.

“She is not in the least like a seraph,” said Sir Harry, as if there were something especially derogatory in the comparison.

“ My dear fellow, she shall be like anything you please,” Mr. Robert Morrison was saying, when a movement on the part of Mr. Morrison’s footmen indicated some arrival of importance, and Mr. Wright, walking forward, began—

“ Allow me, my Lord, to have the honour of introducing my very good friend and most liberal parishioner, Mr. Morrison. I am proud to have so public-spirited and generous a gentleman located in this parish. In whatsoever place he may have chosen to cast his lot, he has always proved himself a staunch pillar of the Church.”

The Bishop, who, being a most quiet and unpretending individual, looked, but for his dress, much less like a bishop than Mr. Wright, expressed himself truly delighted to make Mr. Morrison’s acquaintance, and shook hands, with much

impressiveness, on the side path, to which Mr. Morrison had promptly descended.

Then his Lordship stepped, with an air of dignified accustomedness, which was not at all assumed, into the carriage, and Mr. Wright, at Mr. Morrison's solicitation, was about to follow, when his eye fell on the two young men, who had fallen a little back when the Bishop appeared on the scene.

If Mr. Wright had met Calcraft in his Sunday clothes wandering about Fisherton parish he would have raised the rectorial hat in greeting. The practice had often served him in good stead, and he was not going to deviate from it now ; so he greeted Mr. Robert Morrison and Sir Harry Medburn with affable condescension, and they, as in duty bound, returned his salute.

“My son, Mr. Wright,” said Mr. Morrison, senior; “lately returned from Egypt; and Sir Harry Medburn,” added the millionaire.

Whereupon the Rector seemed to expand, physically and morally. He could not tell Mr. Robert Morrison how charmed he was to see him at Fisherton. He could not express to Sir Harry Medburn how delighted he was to make his acquaintance.

He trusted they would both come on to the Rectory and partake of luncheon. Only a few friends to meet his Lordship. No ceremony, just a glass of wine, a slice of meat, and a biscuit. With Mrs. Wright absent, he could offer little, but that little he hoped the young men would honour with their presence. Nothing loth, the young men availed themselves of the invitation.

“Send the carriage back, please sir,” said Mr. Robert Morrison to his father; and then the carriage referred to, containing the Bishop, Mr. Wright, and Mr. Morrison, senior, drove off, the Rector returning the salutations of his parishioners in a “king by the grace of God and defender of the faith” manner.

The meagre glass of wine, the modest slice of beef, the vague biscuit of which Mr. Wright had made mention, proved to be simply figurative expressions, really representing a feast that need have shamed the table of no modern Belshazzar.

On the board appeared everything in season, and many things out of it. Each guest, with the exception of the Bishop, had contributed something to the feast, which thus came really to assume a little of the character of a picnic. Spring

chickens, as large as young turkeys, came from the yards of Sir John Giles, whose "lady" had made poultry a study, and sold sittings of eggs at fabulous prices. Fruit and flowers were contributed by Mr. Morrison; the Rector's churchwarden, who had never before found himself in such grand and good company, had sent in enough butter, and cheese, and bacon from his little farm, as he modestly called eight hundred acres, as would, Bella Miles and Nurse Mary calculated, last the family for three weeks. As to the other churchwarden, who said he was a plain man, and did not want to intrude on the Bishop or anybody else, he dispatched from his warehouse in town, which warehouse happened, "providentially" Mr. Wright said, to be of the description called Italian, such a supply of foreign delicacies that the Rector's heart softened

towards the sometime recalcitrant parish representative, and blessed him for all the dainties he should now be able to take to the seaside, snugly packed, when he next ran down to see poor Selina.

Never, out of a great man's house, had the Bishop beheld such preparations in his honour, and as it was part and parcel of Mr. Wright's nature and politics to give unbounded honour where honour was due, his Lordship soon understood that the entertainment was rather secular than clerical; that the luncheon was but a series of gifts laid at his own admirable feet, and his soul inclined to the man able, at this time of the world, to draw such admirable offerings from the cellars, and forcing-houses, and dairies, and warehouses, of his friends, in order to do honour to his ecclesiastical chief.

Especially in the matter of that port.

The Colonel had struck by accident his Lordship's weakness.

He was no *gourmand*, or *gourmet*. Like most wise people, he liked good things when they fell in his way; but he was moderate in, and not over particular concerning, his fare, as became a bishop.

“But if he must drink wine,” this was what he said himself, “if people would insist on offering him something out of a decanter, instead of a tumbler of honest Bass—a beverage good enough for an emperor—he did not care to swallow a decoction of blackberries.”

And no doubt the poor man had often been forced to taste the products of some even less natural vintage, for which reason his Lordship appreciated the outcome of Colonel Leschelles' cellar, and was gracious to him accordingly.

Now, this pleased Mr. Wright. The

Colonel was, *par excellence*, his friend, and not his parishioner. The Colonel held a different position from that occupied by any one else round and about the table. Further, the Colonel and Sir Harry Medburn had at once discovered they knew each other intimately; knew far more about each other, in fact, Mr. Wright could see plainly, than the baronet knew of Mr. Robert Morrison.

“Really exceedingly gratifying,” the poor Rector thought, mentally planning his evening letter to Selina. “Gratifying in the extreme.”

But gratifying as the luncheon proved, the tea-party on the lawn, to which several ladies, anxious to say they had met the Bishop, were bidden, proved more gratifying still. His Lordship praised the grounds, and their state of excellent cultivation.

“Well, it is no credit to me, my Lord,” said Mr. Wright, “and very little expense either. As curate, I naturally moved about a good deal, and in each place where we settled my dear wife found some sickly gardener, or weakly labourer, or pensioner past regular work, whom she was able to help—for it is marvellous how little does help the poor—and now they come to us, first one and then the other; and when they do, they take off their coats and begin to put things in order. And they send us, those who are in situations, roots and plants, the things coming with their masters’ compliments, and it is wonderful, it is really,” finished Mr. Wright, “how our garden has grown and been kept passably tidy.”

The Bishop thought the state of the garden spoke highly for all parties concerned; which was very natural, seeing

his Lordship had not provided the beef and mutton, and arrowroot, and tea and so forth, these poor creatures needed, and been forced to wait months and years for his money, like some of the tradesmen Mr. Wright benefited by his patronage.

And then, when the Bishop praised the coffee, Mr. Wright said it was a present from his good kind friend, the parish warden, and made by one of his girls ; but he did not mention that the girl's name was Bella Miles.

Indeed, during the whole of that evening Bella passed muster as one of the family.

Even Robert Morrison, who having seen Maria talking to his mother concerning the clothes-baskets of flowers, knew only her amongst the Rector's daughters, remained under the same delusion, until, happening to remark how

little Miss Bella resembled her sister, Lady Giles informed him the girl was not even a relation of the Wrights, but some orphan, whose friends paid Mr. Wright "only a hundred a year for the inestimable advantage of living at the Rectory."

This with a sneer; for Lady Giles, who was no match for Mrs. Wright either in cleverness or repartee, disliked that lady, as is the pleasing manner of her pleasing sex, for no reason in particular.

She and Sir John had met the Morrisons abroad—had, indeed, first directed their attention to Fisherton Lodge as a desirable place to purchase—therefore she and Mr. Robert stood on the basis of old acquaintances; and her Ladyship hoped Robert—familiarly called Bob—might marry her daughter Victoria, occupied at that present moment in scolding her maid for malpractices in the matter of folding up dresses.

For Miss Victoria's name had by some mischance been left out of the list of invited guests—greatly, to say the truth, at the instigation of Miss Maria Wright; and as it would have seemed a special insult to Lady Giles to invite other unmarried ladies and exclude her daughter, no unmarried ladies were present—always excepting the Rector's family (including Bella Miles)—save those who, by reason of there remaining no matrimonial prospect whatsoever, were as good as married, or, by reason of lack of daughters, better.

Miss Miles did all that lay in her power to make the afternoon pass pleasantly. The Bishop complimented Mr. Wright on his charming family; and Mr. Wright bowed his delighted acknowledgments, and said, “My Lord, though I say it, who perhaps should not, throughout England there is no more united household than mine.”

“And your eldest daughter seems a treasure in herself,” remarked his Lordship, referring to Bella.

“She is the image of her mother when I first saw her,” said Mr. Wright, referring to Maria.

“How remarkably unlike,” thought the Bishop, “are the rest of the children to the mother.”

After that a wonderful thing happened. The Bishop, while talking to Bella Miles, forgot that his train left at a certain hour, so actually supposed he must wait until the next.

To fill up the interval, some one suggested “music”; and Mrs. Wright being absent, and Mr. Wright knowing perfectly no one present but Miss Miles could satisfy the ears of a bishop, asked her to play.

And Bella did play. With all the power God had given her—with all the

veins of her heart—she brought harmony out of the misused piano that night, and told to more than one of her auditors something of the force and passion in her nature.

“It is marvellous!” said the Bishop: “it is indeed. I could not have believed so young a girl capable of playing as she does. I congratulate you. It is long since I have spent so profitable and pleasant a day—a day, I may truly say, of unmixed satisfaction. I am so much obliged!—thank you most earnestly.”

And, with the last conventional sentence on his lips, exit the Bishop in Mr. Morrison’s carriage, Mr. Morrison seeing him to the station.

“What a wonderful girl that eldest daughter of our friend seems to be,” said the Bishop, speaking on the subject just then nearest to his mind.

“She is extremely pretty,” agreed the millionaire, who shared the tastes of his son, and who considered Maria Wright a much “sweeter-looking creature” than Miss Miles.

“And what an admirable musician!” observed the Bishop.

“I am told all the Rector’s children are clever in that respect; but I am no judge of music myself.”

“Your friend the baronet is a little attracted in that quarter, or I am much deceived,” said his Lordship, a little slyly.

“Yes; my son made some remark to a similar effect,” answered Mr. Morrison, still playing at cross purposes; and the next time he met Mr. Wright, he asked him some absurd question about Sir Harry, and told him even the Bishop had noticed how deeply the young man was smitten by Miss Maria’s pretty face.

Out of pure mischief Mr. Robert Morrison had, after the Bishop left, managed to draw Mr. Wright apart in order to enlarge on the same theme; and accordingly, between champagne—a good deal of that wine being drunk at a late and very cosy supper, at which only Colonel Leschelles, the Rector, Mr. Robert Morrison, and his friend were present—the remembered affability of the Bishop, the success of the day's proceedings, and visions of rank and wealth for Maria, Mr. Wright went to bed jubilant.

Not, however, before he had written to his better-half. The Reverend Dionysius never neglected her. If he had remembered few other promises in life, the vows made at a certain little country church in Wicklow were religiously kept by plausible, well-intentioned, selfish, careless Mr. Wright.

He had never been selfish towards Selina : she and the children were always considered first, and himself last ; and if sometimes he did, as he could not help doing, enjoy a day thoroughly in her absence, there always succeeded to his pleasure a sense of wrong, as if his happiness had been purchased at the cost of a certain disloyalty to her.

For this reason, ere he slept, Mr. Wright penned the following letter to his absent wife :—

“DEAREST S.” (it was thus Mr. Wright, in the sacred familiarity of matrimonial correspondence, usually addressed his Selina)—“Late as it is—*One* A.M.—I must write you a line to say everything went off splendidly. The confirmation—the luncheon—all a *complete success*. His Lordship was *more* than gracious. He was

condescendingly familiar ; indeed, many a rector *we* have known has been far less affable. The girls looked lovely—simply lovely ; Maria in especial, saint-like and angelic, reminding me of *you know who*, on the day which made me the happiest man in the three kingdoms.

“ Her dress suited the dear child to perfection, and the solemnity of the service imparted a look of sweet thoughtfulness to her face, which endued it with a *finishing charm*. I am not alone in this opinion. Parental vanity has not led me astray on this point. The dear girl was universally admired. Good, kind, charming Bella looked quite plain by comparison. The simple, modest attire which set off the retiring beauty of the one failed to suit the very different style of our child by adoption, who proved herself to-day all you could wish.

“And now, my dear, I come to the pith of my story. Our Maria has made a conquest. Of course it is not for any poor fallible human being to tell how this may all turn out ; but a certain Sir Harry Medburn, staying with the Morrisons, has—so young Morrison assures me—quite lost his heart to our pretty one. He seems a very nice fellow, and, I find from Dod, is the patron of two livings !

“According to Morrison, he has thirteen thousand a year ; and Leschelles, who knows him well, says he will be heir to a Sir Alexander Kelvey, who made heaps of money out in India, and who has no other near male relative. You will not, dearest S., take all this for more than it is worth ; but I do think our sweet child stands a very fair chance of being asked to become my Lady—God bless her ! Leschelles has invited Medburn to stay with him

when he leaves the Morrisons. I have said nothing to Leschelles about Maria. *He is odd* in his notions, as you have often remarked; and I think least said in such a case is soonest mended.

“Inclosed is half of a five-pound note. It is my last, and I do not know where any more is to come from at present; but the hour before dawn is the darkest, and I trust our dawn is near at hand.

“I wrote to Mr. Irwin, asking him for fifty-pounds—just another poor fifty—*nothing* to him, health to you, and ease of mind to me; and what do you suppose he did?—sent me *a statement of account*, bringing me in one hundred and sixty-five pounds overdrawn—as if, even supposing he never received that amount it could repay us for our loving care of that poor child, who is so grateful for our kindness. He explained that business was dull, and

money scarce, etc., etc.—the *usual trade cry*, with which time has made us so well acquainted; and he said 'he must really beg me to excuse him from making any further advances at present. After all, my dear, as you say—I beg your pardon, you do not say anything so vulgar—but as you imply, there is 'a dirty drop' somewhere in Mr. Irwin, and that *will show itself*. The longer I live, the more fully satisfied I feel that *blood* cannot associate for any length of time with *bone*. If you could only see the difference there is between young Morrison and his friend Sir Harry! But, of course, you will see, and, as usual, draw your own admirable conclusions.

"Don't buy anything this week till you see the hamper unpacked which I shall take down the day after to-morrow.

"Every one contributed to to-day's

feast. We have had in our lives, spite of much anxiety, my dear S., great cause for thankfulness; and could you have seen the success of to-day, you must have called it a *complete victory*. Nothing could have been better. I do not believe his Lordship ever sat down to a better luncheon, better served, in his life.

“Good night—or, rather, good morning, darling. Kiss the young master for me. What do you think of Leschelles and Medburn for godfathers, with Bella Miles for godmother? The conjunction might please even W. C. I., and be beneficial to the rogue hereafter.

“Ever yours devotedly,

“DION.”

Having addressed, and sealed up, and stamped which epistle, “hers devotedly Dion” put on his hat, and, whistling softly

to himself, walked up to the little village shop that served as post-office, in order to drop his love-letter in the box.

It was a beautiful night, tender and mild, with refreshing perfumes pervading the air, the sky laden with a suspicion of light from the coming day.

The Rector extended his walk, and strolled on past Fisherton Lodge, to Riversdale, and thence home.

“Our dear Maria,” he thought, “shall be mistress over a finer establishment than either of these. And there have been people who thought they could crush *me*. Ah! they did not quite understand the Rev. Mr. Wright!”

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONJUGAL TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

It was not that time of roses which old-fashioned writers had in their mind when gossiping about the pleasant seasons, and to which modern poets, all honour to them for their constancy, have remained faithful.

The fragrant cabbage-rose, the picturesque York and Lancaster, the little button-like *des mois*—which name children used to alter and improve into *des mots*—the pure white clustering amid green on great trees, not mere bushes; the pure white in which, in warm sum-

mers, the rose beetle reflected its brilliant colours to the sun; all these, and many another rose the beauty and perfume of which delighted our grandmothers, had shed their despised leaves, once considered precious and collected carefully by dainty fingers for preservation in great china jars, and still the modern standards in the Rectory garden, bunches of colour surmounting long bare stems, went on blooming, unmindful of their dead, fair kindred.

It was late summer in the rectory garden, where were beds all aglow with scarlet geraniums; borders decked by the Rev. Dion's grateful dependents, with all possible variations of that monstrosity, ribbon gardening; plots left by good fortune to chance old seeds and the children, and so growing flaunting poppies wreathed by many-coloured diver-

sities of the nasturtium tribe, with here a tuft of mignonette, and there an almost wild growth of sweet peas, and French marigolds, a flower which bids fair soon to become as extinct as the tremulous harebell and the deeper blued gentianella.

Other beds there were telling of the work of a careful hand directed by a different head.

Here is one, a centre of fuchsia, surrounded entirely by heliotropes, well pegged down; here is a second, a bed filled with ivy geraniums and many-coloured verbenas; and then what could the heart of man desire to behold more beautiful than that wealth of gladioli surrounding an arbutus dwarf—as, unhappily, arbutus insists on growing away from Killarney.

Yes, the old rose month had long gone by, and that time which the Rev. Mr.

Wright declared was the prime of the whole year at Fisherton was come, bringing with it hot days and sultry nights, the perfumes of all rich odorous flowers ; and at intervals, too, the first faint scent of autumn's fading leaves.

Mrs. Wright sat by an open window looking out over the garden sloping to the Thames. From the river came the occasional plash of oars, and sometimes the sound of some distant party singing "Row, brothers, row," or a sentimental love ditty.

It was a calm peaceful scene on which the twilight deepened ; but Mrs. Wright did not feel calm or peaceful.

She had come home expecting to find that everything was going on satisfactorily, and behold nothing was going on as it ought.

For weeks, Sir Harry had been hover-

ing about the Rectory, now staying with Colonel Leschelles, and accompanying him in his visits, then taking up his residence at a riverside inn, some three miles distant, and rowing down to Fisherton, again rushing off to Devonshire, and returning thence accompanied by hampers containing rare fruits and exotics for Mrs. Wright, and within a day or two running up to London, whence he brought gifts that caused the breasts of the younger Wrights to leap for joy under their white pinafores.

Nor were the elders forgotten. Mrs. Wright could not mention any want which the baronet failed instantly to supply. He gave Mr. Wright a handsome writing-table. He presented the Demoiselles Wright with brooches, which those young ladies displayed next Sunday in church.

There was only one person to whom Sir Harry gave nothing, and with whom he seemed a little shy—Bella Miles—and she was usually very silent when he spent the evening at the rectory.

At that time she did not, however, talk much to any one. The only person in whose society she evinced any pleasure was that of Colonel Leschelles. She always left Sir Harry and the girls to amuse themselves, and stole away to the side of her elderly friend, who seemed in some danger in those days of being neglected by all the Wrights save the Reverend Dion.

Openly Mrs. Wright expressed an opinion that Colonel Leschelles was acting as a spy on their younger visitor's movements.

“It is no business of his,” she commented, “but I am quite certain he

does not want Sir Harry to propose for Maria.”

“I am not altogether of your opinion,” said her husband. “The other morning, just to hear what he thought of the matter, I pointed to Maria and the baronet, and remarked, ‘I think our friend is pretty far gone in that quarter.’ ‘Do you mean in love with your eldest daughter?’ he inquired. ‘Well, yes, if you will put the case so strongly,’ I answered. ‘I am afraid he is not,’ he said, with a solemn shake of his head.”

“Old simpleton!” interrupted Mrs. Wright. “I wonder what he and Bella Miles are talking about so perpetually. She never seems happy except when she is strolling off with him somewhere. Do you think, Dion, there is any likelihood of his leaving her all his money?”

“I do not know. He might make

a worse disposition of it," said the Rector.

On this point, however, Mrs. Wright did not agree with her husband. If Colonel Leschelles left his money to Bella Miles, to what purpose had the latest arrival been christened Archibald Harry Miles Wright, Sir Harry Medburn, the Colonel, and Miss Bella having all stood sponsors for him ?

"With a fortune, Bella would be sure to marry, and then the Colonel might as well never have been—never have enjoyed their hospitality at Christmas. It was most provoking," Mrs. Wright said, beginning to have strong opinions about taking in strangers, about "whom one knows nothing," to the privacy of a refined and delightful home.

Something to this tune Mrs. Wright sat by the window thinking. Away in

the distance, by the river's brink, two people walked—up and down—up and down—till their monotonous pace made Selina feel quite irritable.

“Curran,” she cried, at last, to that young gentleman, who was disporting himself on the lawn, “Run and tell Bella I want her.”

But Curran pursed up his lips and shook his head.

“Run this instant, you naughty boy!” persisted his mother.

“Shan't,” said the naughty boy. “Shan't. The Colonel told me to go away and play, and when I once happened to get near them again, he spoke to me, oh! so cross—just as pa does when the butcher has been here for money.” Curran, in the excitement of making this communication, approached incautiously near the window, and was

rewarded for the simile so ingeniously introduced by a smart slap, which had the effect of sending him off howling to the kitchen, where he was solaced with bread and jam, and had the pleasure of telling his tale to an appreciative audience.

“She’s just bewitched, that’s what it is,” commented Nurse Mary, while Curran swallowed his jam and his tears together.

“Surely you never think she would be——” the housemaid was beginning, when a look from Nurse Mary stopped her.

“Isn’t it wonderful,” said that privileged domestic, laying her hand on the side of Curran’s head, “how the length of children’s ears differs?”

With which profound observation she diverted the talk from Miss Miles and

her "old veteran," as she called the Colonel.

Already the kitchen understood that which the parlour failed to see.

"I'm thinking she'll take him," Nurse Mary mentally decided. "Well, that will be spring and winter, if you like. The man's old enough to be *my* grandfather, for the matter of that."

Mrs. Wright put a shawl over her head and stepped out into the garden. In the distance she could still see Colonel Leschelles and Bella Miles, but they were now standing still under a willow which grew beside the walk, and at that point almost concealed every one sheltered by its drooping branches.

Yes, they were standing still; but what was Bella Miles doing? Mrs. Wright could not believe the evidence of her senses.

She had taken the Colonel's left hand and was kissing it—Mrs. Wright felt capable of making affidavit on that point—while the Colonel, not to be behind-hand in civilities of so questionable a nature, had laid his right hand on her hair and was speaking to the girl earnestly.

Mrs. Wright turned and went back to the house; she had seen too much—more than she felt she could trust herself to repeat to the Rev. Dion—then, at all events.

When the rest of the household had retired, and Mr. and Mrs. Wright were left to enjoy that solitary hour of uninterrupted conversation which the twenty-four contained, the lady began—

“Dion, I want you to do something for me, or rather two things.”

“Fifty, my dear, if I can,” answered the Rector, gallantly but judiciously.

"Bella is very fond of you, I know."

"Poor thing!" remarked Mr. Wright, treating the remark as a compliment, and deprecating it.

"She has a high opinion of your judgment, and would be likely to listen to any advice you might give her."

"I am sure, my love, it is very good of you to think so," said the Rector, who would have felt much more comfortable had he understood whither his wife was driving.

"It is true," returned Mrs. Wright solemnly. "Every one must see how partial the girl is to you."

"She is jealous," thought the Rector. "I knew how it would be sooner or later." But he only remarked aloud that he believed Bella was partial to all of them. "She has good cause to be fond of you, at any rate," added the worthy

Rector, who never missed an opportunity, at home or abroad, of sounding Selina's praises, "for you have made her what she is."

"In some respects I hope not, Dion," answered Mrs. Wright. "I have done my best for the girl. If I were on my death-bed to-morrow, and I have been too lately lying on what seemed very like my death-bed to——"

"Now, now, now, my dear," interrupted her husband, stretching his hand across the table and clasping it kindly in his own, "you must not talk in this way. You were very, very ill, but not so bad as that, thank God! And while you were laid up, Bella, I am sure, did credit to your teaching. She was like a mother to the children——"

"I daresay," interposed Mrs. Wright, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes,

and turning very red at the comparison the poor Rector had so innocently instituted—"I daresay she did take a good deal on herself while I was so ill, and away. She is very fond of taking on a little brief authority. Any one, to see her doing this, that, and the other about the house, might imagine everything had been neglected hitherto."

"Well, well, Selina, she is young, remember, and young people are not all blessed with the tact you possessed even at twenty. Make allowances for her, my love; for in some way, though I confess I cannot tell in what way, she has been unfortunately placed. And there can be no doubt but that her progenitors have been very common sort of people; and we know, you and I, that the old proverb which says, 'You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,' is as true as

that 'You cannot draw blood out of a turnip.'

"I do make allowances for her," answered Mrs. Wright, putting aside the Reverend Dion's popular quotations as irrelevant to the matter in hand, "and I am sure I bear no ill-will to the girl, though she does try to make much of herself, and throws our dear ones into the shade. The way she went on playing last night, when Sir Harry was here, I considered perfectly disgusting."

After all, there are two sides to maternal affection: one which is very beautiful, and another which acts as a reminder of the savage pecks a hen is wont to administer to a chicken not her own. Poor, dear Mrs! Wright was amiability itself to any girl who did not poach on the manor of her charming flock; but her eyes were very sharp indeed to notice the faults,

real or fancied, of that youthful maiden who stood to intercept the sunshine falling upon the rectory daughters.

Said the Rev. Dion, answering his wife's parenthesis—

“Perhaps Bella did play a little too long and too much last night; but we ought not to find fault with her, as it enabled our young friend to devote himself exclusively to Maria.”

“I am not quite sure of it,” replied Mrs. Wright. “That sort of professional playing is very distracting to many people. I know I never can even write a letter when she is performing. In my opinion, the music annoyed Sir Harry: he looked quite out of sorts all the evening.”

“What is it you want me to do?” asked the Rector, understanding that this sort of discourse might go on indefinitely, unless he pinned Selina to one

subject. "Am I to ask Bella not to exhibit her accomplishments, or to suggest that she makes herself too busy about the house?"

There was a certain bitterness in Mr. Wright's tone as he put his question, which happily dearest S. failed to notice, so eager was she to answer—

"No, nothing of the kind. I want you to advise her not to be quite so familiar in her manner towards Colonel Leschelles."

Mr. Wright set down his tumbler. He had been, when his wife spoke, in the act of putting it to his lips.

"Towards Colonel Leschelles!" he repeated. "What on earth do you mean, Selina? What cat is with egg now?"

"I wish, Dion, you would not use such low expressions. If you accustom yourself to employ them when alone with me,

you may say what you would be very sorry to think you had said in public. And there is nothing to cause such expressions of astonishment. Bella Miles is — well, we don't exactly know what Bella Miles is ; and Colonel Leschelles is a vain old simpleton, who could be flattered into leaving his money to a charwoman, if she only knew the way to take him."

"I wish I knew how to take him," said Mr. Wright, plaintively.

"We are not the people to do a thing of that kind," objected Mrs. Wright, plaintively. "We are too honest and too straightforward to condescend to tricks that are but everyday weapons in the hands of mere worldlings. Bella Miles comes from no one knows where, and belongs to no one knows who ; and if you are blind, I cannot shut my eyes.

She is wheedling the Colonel into a belief of her utter simplicity and amiability; and I repeat, you ought to speak to her, and say, though you are certain she means nothing by her manners, still they are not so circumspect as you could wish them to be."

"Why not speak to her yourself?" asked Mr. Wright.

"Because she thinks, wrongly, that I am prejudiced—because she understands my standard of propriety in a woman's behaviour is very different to hers—because she likes you better than she likes me, and would attach importance to your advice, and none to mine."

"You are quite wrong in your idea, Selina," returned the Rector; "but I will speak to her, if you consider it well for me to do so. What is the next thing in her conduct to which you object? It

may be as well to include all her sins in one lecture."

"I have nothing more to say about Bella *at present*," answered Mrs. Wright, with an ominous emphasis on the two last words. "What I want you to do further is to get some sort of an explanation from Sir Harry. It is not well for him to be hanging about the house and making no sign. If he admires Maria enough to come here three or four days a week, and two or three times a day, he ought to say so in plain English. We cannot have a young man, even if he be a baronet, amusing himself at our expense. Maria is very pretty, we know; and if he thinks her pretty enough to fall in love with, he ought to ask your permission to propose for her. If she is not pretty enough to be Lady Medburn, she should not be flirted with—of that

there can be no doubt. You must speak to him, Dion. You ought to tell him how difficult our position is here, and how necessary we find it to have everything straightforward and clearly understood. He should have seen this himself without any hint from you; but as, like all English people, he seems utterly destitute of tact, we must show him that affairs cannot go on much longer as they are."

The Rev. Dion rose from his seat and took two or three hurried turns up and down his study. He had a man's natural reluctance to force his child upon another man's acceptance; and yet, still knowing Selina's view of the affair was correct, he did not dare to shirk the task assigned to him.

Nevertheless, he tried to temporize. "Do you think, dear," he asked, once

again taking possession of his chair, "that it is necessary to ask Sir Harry for an explanation at once? He is not a worldly man, as you see; he is not a man who has mixed much with worldly people. Supposing we give him a little longer law. The fact is, Selina," finished Mr. Wright, "that I don't know where to turn for money; and if I speak to Medburn about Maria, I can't ask him for a loan."

"I should think not," said Mrs. Wright scornfully.

"Then how am I to keep the wolf from the door? It is very close upon us again, remember."

"How should you have kept it away had you never seen Sir Harry Medburn?"

Which was one of the speeches poor dear, clever Mrs. Wright considered trenchant, and yet which was really

as absurd as if she had asked the Rev. Dion how he would have reared his family had he never seen her.

“I am sure I cannot tell, Selina,” answered her husband. “All other doors seem shut, and this about the only one which is open.”

“Can’t you go to Mr. Morrison?”

Mr. Wright shook his head. “You know, dear, I have never yet applied to a man *certain* to refuse me.”

“And you think he would?”

“He would, without doubt. If I wanted the church restored—if it were necessary for new schools to be built—if there was anything, in fact, to which he could sign his name, Samuel Morrison, and thrust it under the eyes of the public, I should not have to ask in vain; but as regards giving in private, or lending to a man in straits like myself,

he would just as soon fling his money into the Thames. I have taken the latitude and longitude of Fisherton, Selina, pretty well, and know there is only one way of navigating our craft in these waters. If I may not ask Medburn, I tell you candidly, I don't see in which direction we are to turn."

Then Mrs. Wright's maternal feelings rose triumphant, and she became sublime.

"We must not be selfish, Dion," she finished. "At whatever cost to ourselves, we must consider our dear child. If by doing anything unwise, or leaving anything wise undone, we prevented Maria becoming Lady Medburn, I should never forgive myself, and I am certain neither would you. Besides, if he once proposes for her, we shall be able to get money. In that case, even Mr. Irwin

might let you have what you want. No, Dion, I may not be so clever as some women—though you have told me you would trust my judgment and penetration beyond that of any man you ever met—but I am right about our dear child. Speak to Sir Harry to-morrow. You know how to put such a matter, if any one does.”

“Very well,” said the Rector, evidently unconsolated by this compliment, however; “but remember, Selina, I don’t think speaking is good policy. I should not have liked being spoken to when I was first in love with you.”

At which remark Mrs. Wright laughed outright.

“You dear old Dion, you would only have been too glad had any one thought of such a thing! You know you never for a moment imagined papa and mamma

would allow me to think of a poor curate."

"That is true enough," agreed the Rector, with an affectation of humility and a sly twinkle in his eyes which belied his tone. "You see, at that time I did not know on how little money your father was keeping up appearances; and I was always a man who entertained a low opinion of my own merits."

"I think," suggested Mrs. Wright, "that we had better go to bed."

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. WRIGHT IS ASTONISHED.

DURING the course of that night the Rector slept uneasily, and awoke often.

Whenever he awoke it was with a start, and a feeling that something had gone very much amiss.

First he thought—long experience of such miseries having tended naturally to lead his imagination into that and similar channels—that a guest, not invited and not desired, was occupying a certain “chamber on the wall” of the Rectory, and, between dreamland and consciousness, he struggled to remember “at

whose suit"—and for what amount he was there—whether the sheriff's officer was a man he knew, and who knew him, and similar gropings after light.

Then his notion would change, and he felt certain something dreadful had happened to Selina or one of the children; and when he had cleared his mind of these fears, he recollected suddenly that he was bound within a very few hours to remonstrate with Bella Miles on the forwardness of her manners, and to hint delicately to Sir Harry Medburn that Maria and Maria's mother, and, inclusively, Maria's father and all her family, to the hundredth cousin, had been waiting so long for his expected proposal that they were tired of waiting much longer.

"I can't stand any more of this," thought the Reverend Dion, when, after waking for about the twentieth time, he found

the sun making his morning investigations into every corner of the apartment, and he exorcised his dream-devils by getting out of bed and passing softly into his dressing-room—after folding the bed linen with tender hands over the wife who lay, her pale, worn face a little in shadow, sleeping soundly.

And, lest the sound of sponging and splashing might disturb her, the Reverend Dion dispensed with his bath, which he loved, and dipping his head into the basin, at once enveloped it in a towel, and dressed himself very noiselessly and went downstairs, where he found the servants beginning to creep reluctantly about that morning work which servants hate with an intensity worthy of a greater grievance.

“ Ah ! ” considered the Reverend Dion, “ they don’t tub. How different even poor faithful Nurse Mary would look if she

could be persuaded to step out of bed into a cold bath."

As poor faithful Nurse Mary had probably never been washed all over since babyhood (if then), she would have received a friendly suggestion about stepping into a lake of fire and brimstone with equal favour; but the ideas evolved out of the spectacle of Mary's heavy eyes and unkempt hair served to beguile Mr. Wright's attention till he was out of the rectory grounds, and off for a long morning walk, along one of those hideous roads which intersect the valley of the Thames.

On his return, he found the servants a little wider awake, the children rampant, breakfast ready, and Mrs. Wright—to whom a restorative cup of tea had been administered in bed half an hour previously—just down, looking ill and languid.

“You do not seem very well this morning, Selina,” remarked the Rector.

“I have passed a miserable night,” answered his better-half. “I felt quite thankful when it was time to get up.”

Mr. Wright was far too astute to controvert this statement, which, rendered into English, he understood to mean: “Remember, I have all this harass about Maria’s affair to keep me awake at night,” and, understanding, he girt up his loins for the impending interview with Sir Harry.

But first he had to remonstrate with Bella Miles, who wondered during the course of the morning much concerning the nature of the fresh anxiety which caused Mr. Wright to beat his chest so often and exclaim with such doleful unconsciousness, “Hi! ho! hum!” when he helped himself to butter or cut Selina a slice of bacon.

Was another unwelcome guest expected? There had been one already in Bella's knowledge of the rectory, and during his twenty-four hours' stay she gathered that such visitors were not uncommon where Mr. Wright pitched his tent.

The Christmas presents and her own small stock of jewellery had then gone on a hurried journey to town; and while she drank her tea and meditatively ate her toast, Bella was considering whether Sir Harry Medburn's offerings would follow in the way which Mr. Wright's valuables seemed to affect.

When, therefore, after breakfast, the Rector said to her, "One moment, Bella, my dear," and opened the door of his study for her to enter the only place safe from intrusion in the house, Bella, my dear, made up her mind that Mr. Wright

was in sore pecuniary distress, and about to ask counsel—and help, of course—from her.

“Sit down, sit down,” exclaimed the Rector brusquely; and, thus commanded, she sat down and watched him while he drew down the blind, which hung crooked, and then pulled it up till it hung straight.

“I have something disagreeable to say to you, Bella, and I don’t know how to begin,” said the Rector, turning away from the window and walking towards his writing-table, on which lay the materials for the next Sunday’s sermon, waiting Mr. Wright’s skilful manipulation.

“If you are in trouble,” answered the girl, “surely it does not matter how you begin. I hope you can trust *me*.”

Her voice trembled a little. Short as the years of her life had been, they were long enough for thought to travel back

over and recall the trust she once held and fulfilled bravely.

“My dear, it is not that,” said the Rector, softened at once. “I am in trouble. I shall always be in trouble till I am tugged up with a spade in the daisy quilt; and if it were not for Selina and the children, I should not care how soon that event came to pass. But it is not any worry of my own that is teasing me at this present moment. What I want to say concerns yourself.”

“Myself!” she repeated; and the hot tell-tale blood came flushing up into her face, hanging out its crimson colours from each cheek. “Is it anything about Uncle Walter?”

“I assure you Mr. Irwin is quite well—at least he was quite well when last I heard from him. All I have to say need cause you no great distress, though I

confess it vexes me to have to lecture you; but the fact is—yes, the fact is—you are still so much a child—of course no thought of wrong has occurred to your mind—I understand this perfectly—that Mrs. Wright considers you ought to be a little more—how shall I phrase my sentence, so as not to give a false meaning to my words?—a little more—suppose we say—reticent in your manner towards strangers.”

The worthy Rector had honestly tried to avoid offence, but in doing so fell into another error—that of obscurity—bewildering Bella Miles to such an extent that she could only stare at him in blank astonishment.

“I confess,” blundered on Mr. Wright, “the idea of there being anything in your innocent frankness likely to give rise to misconstruction would never have occurred

to me; but no doubt Mrs. Wright is entirely correct in her opinion. She thinks people who do not know you as we do might imagine your manners to be a little too easy and familiar for so young a girl. I repeat, such a notion never crossed my mind. At the same time, my dear Selina is so admirable a judge of the niceties of feminine deportment, and of all shades of propriety, that I have thought it only my duty to mention the matter."

Poor Bella had seen too little of the world to controvert Mr. Wright's statement concerning the infallibility of his dear Selina's judgment on all subjects, etiquette included, and accordingly she sat silent—stunned and mortified—feeling that if once she opened her lips to reply she should burst into tears.

This silence encouraged the Rector.

"I trust, Bella," he said severely, "you

are not cross. Believe me, Mrs. Wright and I have but one object in any remark of this nature—your good. Do you suppose it has been a pleasure to me to find fault with you? Do you think, had duty permitted, I would not much rather have remained silent for ever?”

“I am sure of that,” she answered bravely, and then broke down, asking, while sobbing as if her heart would break, “But what is it I have done? Towards whom have my—my—manners been too familiar?”

“My dear girl—my dear child,” said the Rector, laying his hand on her shoulder, a little more tenderly than Selina, with her accurate opinions about *les convenances*, might altogether have approved, “pray, pray calm yourself! Remember, *I* did not say you had done anything. It was only Mrs. Wright, whose motherly appren-

sions are always awake to your interests, who thought, that is to say, feared——”

“What did Mrs. Wright fear?” inquired the girl, her eyes still cast down, her cheeks still aflame.

“She only feared that others might not understand you so well as we. She only imagined that perhaps the exceeding friendliness of your manner towards Colonel Leschelles might draw censorious remarks from those likely to forget the extreme simplicity of your nature.”

“Colonel Leschelles!” repeated Bella; and she drew a long sigh of relief. “He is a good man, Mr. Wright. I wonder if you know one-half how good he is?”

“I think I do,” answered the Rector dryly; “at any rate, I am sure I ought to know. Waiving that question, however, for the present, it may be just as well for you to bear in mind that he is a man,

though not a young one, and not *your* grandfather, though old enough to be so twice over."

She had done blushing now, and *she* winced at his words no longer.

"I am sorry," she said, "to have grieved Mrs. Wright; but I think—I *do* think she might have spoken to me herself."

Now, this was precisely what Mr. Wright had also thought; but, loyal ever, he replied—

"My dear girl, you may rest satisfied that Mrs. Wright understands these things better than you or I, and—but run away now, child, and hide your red eyes. Here come Sir Harry Medburn and Maria."

And as he conjoined the names of the baronet and his daughter, the Rector's shirt-front swelled out perceptibly. He threw his head back, he ran his fingers

through his hair in view of one of Sir Harry's livings as a step, and a bishopric as a goal; he turned over the pages of future manuscript lying on the table; yea, even, when Bella was gone, he hummed to himself a few bars of some tuneless air.

At that moment Mr. Wright believed Fortune was smiling upon him, and he, courteous as ever, smiled back at her. But fortune, as we know, is apt to be deceitful. Fortune was deceiving Mr. Wright while he was thinking how to receive her advances with becoming modesty.

Down the avenue came Maria and the baronet, Maria looking "very pret-ty indeed," looking very much like her mother, so Mr. Wright thought when Selina was in her happy teens, ignorant of the cares of a family, and knowing very little about dress and bills, Mr.

Curran, with that pride which distinguished his character, taking these domestic burdens upon his own ample shoulders.

Certainly Maria was pretty, a girl "fitted to adorn any sphere," decided Mr. Wright, as, stepping to his study window, he welcomed the baronet.

"What a superb morning!" said the Rector, in rich, rolling tones of approval. "Come in, come in;" and he grasped Sir Harry's hand, and made him free of the study, and the chairs and tables, and books and shelves, all of which had been so often held in trust by a man from Reuben's.

"He has proposed," Mr. Wright said to himself as he saw Maria disappear and beheld the baronet suitably seated for a *tête-à-tête*. "Well, well! it is a long lane which has no turning, and God knows

my lane has been long enough and weary enough to entitle me to some change at last."

So reflected the Rector, while Sir Harry pulled the ears of a sorry mongrel, once the property of a disreputable costermonger in the New Cut, who had presented the creature to Mrs. Wright as a delicate acknowledgment of various kindnesses done by her to a woman who perhaps should have been his wife, but who was not.

"Charming weather," said Mr. Wright, finding his visitor made no sign, uneasily moving his sheets of paper. "Just the very best part of the year for Fisherton, eh?"

"I dare say it is," agreed the young man; "but I am going away."

"Going away!"

With a sudden jolt Mr. Wright found

himself precipitated from his air castle on the bosom of mother earth.

“Going away! Well, you do astonish me! But only for a short time, I suppose? You will be back ere long?”

“I do not think so,” was the reply. “I do not think I shall ever see Fisherton again. I wish to heaven I had never seen it.”

“Something has occurred to annoy you?” suggested the Rector.

“Yes,” was the reply; “but I need not trouble you about my private affairs. You and Mrs. Wright have been very kind to me, and so I—I—thought I could not go away without calling to thank you, and to say good-bye.”

“You are not going to slip out of my hands so easily as all that comes to,” considered the Rector; then, after a short pause, added aloud—“My dear young

friend, I am about to say something to you which I feel sure you will take in the spirit in which it is meant. You will not feel offended, for instance, if I——”

“Go on, Mr. Wright,” said the baronet, as that gentleman stopped and hesitated. “I shall not feel offended at anything you may choose to say.”

“Precisely what I expected. You know, Sir Harry, a person has often to say things he would much prefer leaving unsaid. For my part, I think a man should be disassociated from his words in many cases. The words are the world’s words, and oftentimes one most unworldly has to become the world’s mouthpiece.”

“I don’t know—I dare say. If declaring I quite agree with you will make matters any easier for you, pray believe that I agree, so far as I have the slightest comprehension of your meaning.”

Mr. Wright bit his lip. The baronet had no idea how much he helped his mentor when by these light words he put him on his mettle and dug spurs into the flanks of his self-love.

“You have alluded, Sir Harry, to the fact that Mrs. Wright and myself have been able to show you some slight attention during your stay at Fisherton.”

“I can never forget your kindness,” murmured the baronet.

“It has given us the greatest pleasure to receive you here,” went on the Rector. “We have felt honoured by your visits; but, at the same time, we were not so vain as to suppose we owed the happiness of your society entirely to any attractions possessed by ourselves.”

He paused, but his visitor did not answer. He kept his eyes fastened on the floor, and continued caressing the costermonger's mite.

“In short,” proceeded Mr. Wright, “we felt that what the world feels in such a case must be true. When the world sees a young man visiting constantly at a house, it concludes he must have found some very different loadstone in that house—from a middle-aged lady and an overworked parson.”

“And for once, Mr. Wright, your opinion and the world’s are in unison?” suggested the baronet.

“Even from a Christian standpoint the world is not always wrong,” remarked Mr. Wright.

“The world and you being in unison and right,” said Sir Harry, “what then?”

“Why, then I say as the world would say, that frequently as you have come to this house, there is something else you ought to have done before bidding me

and my wife good-bye. Be candid now, don't you think so yourself?"

"Certainly; but it seems to me we are playing at cross purposes. Evidently you are not aware that I have proposed—that I have been rejected."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Wright.

"It is very bad sense to me, nevertheless," said the young man.

"Impossible!" vociferated the Rector.

"Perhaps so, but it is true nevertheless."

"My dear Sir Harry, there is some terrible mistake; you must be labouring under some great delusion. She never could—she never would—oh! it is too ridiculous. You must have been deceived by her shyness—her beautiful timidity—you must have startled her. Why—why did you not take me into your confidence first? But it is not too late, thank

God! her mother shall talk to her; I, myself, will ascertain what it all means. Think of her youth, have patience with her inexperience; why, she is little more than a child—a tender, innocent child. It will be all right, and I shall yet have the happiness of seeing our beloved Maria united to the noblest of men.”

In his enthusiasm, Mr. Wright stretched out his hand; but Sir Harry did not grasp it as the Rector intended he should. He only laid his own left hand on it and said—

“I am so sorry; oh! Mr. Wright, I cannot tell you how grieved I am. I admire and like Miss Maria, but it is not she who has refused me.”

“Who has, then, in Heaven’s name?” inquired the Rector.

“Bella.”

“Bella!” gasped Mr. Wright, then

added in a bewildered aside, "What will Selina say? and Bella, too? and that poor dear child? Well, well! well, well, well!"

"Colonel Leschelles, sir," announced the housemaid at this juncture, and so exit Fortune with a gibing smile, and enter the Colonel, tall, thin, erect, closely buttoned up as ever.

"I will bid you good morning, then," said Sir Harry Medburn, rising hastily. "Pray make my adieux to Mrs. Wright and your family."

"Do you go up by the mid-day train?" asked the Colonel,

"Yes, and shall but have time to catch it," answered the other, looking at his watch. "Good-bye, Mr. Wright, good-bye, Colonel," and he was gone.

For once the Rector's presence of mind had forsaken him and he was stricken dumb. He could think of no form of

words which might undo the evil Bella had wrought and the wrong Maria had sustained, poor dear Maria, who had looked so like Selina in her best days while she walked down the drive with Sir Harry sauntering at her side.

It was all over—the doubt, the hope, the fear, the uncertainty; everything was assured now save this—

What would Selina say?

If the reader remembers, Mr. Wright had asked himself the same question when he first beheld Bella Miles.

And now Bella had spirited away the lover who otherwise might have made the fortunes of the Wright family, and the Rector had very good reason indeed for wondering what Selina would say.

END OF VOL. II.

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